

Jambound

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Jambound

by Anonymous

Summary

The room is too bright.

It's quaint, in a nauseating sort of way. Polished floors glint from the gleaming honeycomb chandeliers overhead, make him squint. A few vases sprinkled here and there, filling the room with a sickeningly sweet scent – even a waffle-cone headrest framing the silken sheets of a neatly-tucked bed. Outside, the golden sun gleams, the gentle rays of light spilling past curtains that waver in the afternoon breeze.

It's meant to be beautiful. Luxurious. Welcoming.

With one sweep of his cane, Shadow Milk tears it apart.

[[Completed]]

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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It's quaint, in a nauseating sort of way. Polished floors glint from the gleaming honeycomb chandeliers overhead, make him squint. A few vases sprinkled here and there, filling the room with a sickeningly sweet scent – even a waffle-cone headrest framing the silken sheets of a neatly-tucked bed. Outside, the golden sun gleams, the gentle rays of light spilling past curtains that waver in the afternoon breeze.

It's meant to be beautiful. Luxurious. Welcoming.

With one sweep of his cane, Shadow Milk tears it apart.

To his credit, Pure Vanilla does not flinch. He stands patiently in the doorway, watching as Shadow Milk throws the curtains shut and flings the dressers across the floor. It's not until the concerned murmuring of other Cookies draws near that there's a step forward, the door shutting to block them from view as Shadow Milk continues eviscerating every scrap of furniture before him.

The bed, he does not touch.

When finished, the room is darkened – far beyond what any normal Cookie could accomplish. A false midnight sky shimmers above, choking out any scrap of miserable light that dared dip into his domain. The gleaming ornaments that had filled the room with joy and life lie shattered on the floor, wooden carnage strewn carelessly. The chandelier now glimmers with faint, blue flame, throwing dancing shadows across the wreckage that leave a bitter smile upon Shadow Milk's lips.

Pure Vanilla clears his throat, and the smile drops.

“Well,” Pure Vanilla hums, stepping gingerly across a shattered lamp. “I suppose I did tell you to make yourself feel at home.”

Shadow Milk does not answer him. There are tens of hundreds of witty retorts that spring to the tip of his silver tongue; he bites them all down, savoring the acrid taste of his own hatred.

It feels sickening, to be silent. The once-Fount of Knowledge, the Master of Deceit, holding back his oh-so valuable words.

Anger like this is so potent, so stunning in the way it stiffens his movements and quickens his breath into something foul and acrid. To be reduced to a Beast not only in name, but in how the feeling of desperate savagery rips through him in each shuddering inhale.

He does not know why he is here.

“Shadow Milk?”

He turns, the call of his name moving his body before he can refuse. His eyes land on the small speck of light that glitters on stubbornly in his darkness.

Pure Vanilla’s Soul Jam gleams under his hungry gaze; Shadow Milk takes in a steady breath.

He knows why he is here.

Pure Vanilla must take his silence for something else, because he has the gall to reach out; his small hand lifted up to where Shadow Milk floats, a quiet beckoning to bring him closer.

Shadow Milk fixes him with a loathing stare and the hand drops, returning back to its familiar perch atop the staff.

“Are you sure?” Pure Vanilla’s murmur is quiet, repugnantly gentle. A soft caress over Shadow Milk’s bristling hackles that does nothing to soothe them.

He finds his words.

“Sorry, did you need something?” The words sail on a lilting tone, patronizing and cruel – Shadow Milk’s specialty. “Can’t you see I’m busy *redesigning*?” Another flick of his cane and the bed flips, tumbling up to pin against the ceiling. “Really, I know you’re needy and all, but I’d think you’d be smart enough to take a **hint**.”

Pure Vanilla’s patient gaze doesn’t waver; worse, it softens. “I have several summons to attend to this evening.”

“Well, aren’t you *popular*?”

“I won’t be able to return until after the moon has set.” Pure Vanilla’s adjusts his grip on his staff – Shadow Milk tamps down on the vicious urge to sink his teeth into him. “Will you be awake?”

“Dollface, I’m surprised I’m awake as it is in this snoozefest of a place.” Shadow Milk crosses his legs, flipping upside-down in the air. “*Vanilla* Kingdom? Really? Points off for originality there.”

“I’ll knock,” Pure Vanilla replies quietly. “If you’d like.”

Nothing about this has been what he *likes*.

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” Shadow Milk floats upwards, landing on the sheets of the bed still pinned overhead. “Listen, if I’m snoozing, you’re always welcome to *come up here* and get me yourself!”

A ghost of a smile graces Pure Vanilla’s lips. “Tonight, then.”

He turns to leave and another impulse sings through Shadow Milk's core, one he is all too delighted to voice.

"I wonder what they think?"

Pure Vanilla turns back, a quiet, questioning gaze in answer.

"You know." Shadow Milk smiles; all teeth, all bared. "Keeping a **Beast** locked away in your chambers. Bit scandalous, no?"

"You are my guest." The reply is too simple, comes too easily. "They will respect that."

In an instant Shadow Milk is off the bed; before the other can even blink Shadow Milk's hovering before him, faces less than an inch apart as their gazes lock in place.

One mismatched eye blinking back at the other. Misbegotten twins, each searching the other for an answer they were never going to give.

"That's not what I asked," Shadow Milk breathes. This close, he can smell Pure Vanilla's scent – light and gentle, cloying and intoxicating. It's a wonder he hasn't been crumbled already, that some equally fanged beast hasn't given in and devoured him whole.

Shadow Milk still might. He hasn't decided.

Pure Vanilla swallows; Shadow Milk traces the movement from the corner of his eyes.

"You-"

"I asked," Shadow Milk hisses, "*what* they think."

He keeps pinning Pure Vanilla with his gaze, unrelenting even as the other's softens in turn. So trapped in the mirror of their eyes, he doesn't even feel the gentle touch on his cheek, not until Pure Vanilla murmurs back:

"What will you make them think?"

A moment passes – a single droplet of time, suspended, wherein the only sound Shadow Milk hears is the quiet huff of their breaths intermingling, the only sensation the warmth of a hand caressing his cheek.

Outside, a bird caws – and the time starts anew.

Shadow Milk sneers, shoving the hand away. He turns his back to the other, floating back up towards the – no, *his* bed as a soft sigh sounds from below.

It is a small mercy that Pure Vanilla accepts the rejection without a fight. The click of the door closing behind him is like a bell tolling relief.

Shadow Milk lets out a sigh of his own, flopping haphazardly on the bed. He stares up at the ceiling, watching the illusionary twilight of his own making shift and swirl in a myriad of

gloom and miasma. His hands find purchase in the sheets, absentmindedly tugging on them until they lay loose and disheveled at his back.

Really. Tucking in the sheets, for the Master of Deceit? The Lord of Chaos? How-Laughable.

--

Hours pass – or they must, anyway.

Shadow Milk's spent it all staring into the void, twirling his wrist and boredly watching apparitions of Cookies squeal and crumble beneath the jaws of wolves, dragons – his own, sometimes. It's tiresome, a tiny balm on the throbbing sore of his mounting frustration.

His growing headache isn't helping but, well, that's a wound of his own doing. He'd been the one to send Pure Vanilla off in a huff – and he hadn't even gotten a sliver of anger from the other for his troubles.

It's the gentle creak of the door that breaks his daze, making him sit upright in bed. There's a pause, then two gentle knocks – causing a sly smile to flit across Shadow Milk's face.

"You know," he calls, twisting his head like an owl. "One is *supposed* to knock *before* entering?"

There's a small laugh in reply and oh –

Pure Vanilla looks *tired*.

The dark coloring under his eyes are almost comical; even the effort he exerts to close the door seems to come with a slight tremble. He heaves a sigh that feels too large to come from such a frail body, following it up with another short laugh.

"My apologies," he rasps, directing his gaze upwards. "Today was... more involved, than I had anticipated."

"Oh golly, oh me, oh my." Shadow Milk snaps his neck back into place, lowering down to the ground until he can float eye-to-eye with the other. "Why Pure Vanilla, you look-" His grin widens, sharp and vicious. "Absolutely *terrible*."

Pure Vanilla huffs another laugh as Shadow Milk gleefully continues: "What'd they do? No wait, let me guess! Stick you under a rolling pin? Drag you through the berry bushes? Or maybe - put you through the oven again?"

"It certainly feels like it." Pure Vanilla reaches up, removing his crown and hanging it on the splintered remains of a coat rack. "I wouldn't say no to the warmth of an oven, anyway. It's

freezing in here.”

Still, his hands reach for the clasp on his cloak. Shadow Milk’s gaze traces his movements as he shrugs off the heavy garments, depositing them carelessly on the floor. The view is amusing, almost pleasing, in a way – if not for the familiar glint of the Soul Jam brooch as it’s dutifully refastened to Pure Vanilla’s robe.

Shadow Milk tears his eyes away from it, slipping back into his wicked smile as he presses: “Well, come on now. Don’t spare the details from little ol’ me. It’s been *so* boring, you could at least do me the favor of telling me all about how *miserable* you were today.”

“Not miserable,” Pure Vanilla corrects, dusting off his robe. “Just tiring. One of the younger Cookies accidentally set off a Golem, and in their haste to escape, brought it into the city proper.” He then looks up, mouth opening to speak again – before falling abruptly silent at the scowl Shadow Milk is levying at him.

“You mean to tell me,” Shadow Milk says slowly, dangerously. “That there was a *Golem* running loose through your oh-so-precious kingdom – and you didn’t think to *invite* me?”

Pure Vanilla perks a curious brow. “I didn’t think you’d be interested in helping with that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t say I would *help*!”

Pure Vanilla hums in reply. He takes a step forward – and they both know what it is.

Seeking acknowledgement, permission. An offer, a request for something that’s growing long overdue.

Shadow Milk doesn’t mimic the motion. He’s stubborn. Sue him.

“And to think,” he mutters sourly, “we were having such a good time talking about how awful you looked.”

Another sigh and Pure Vanilla steps forward again, crossing the room until they stand less than a foot apart. It’s meaningless – Shadow Milk can float as high and away as he pleases – but it is a gesture nonetheless. Pure Vanilla is, once again, the first to reach a hand across the bridge.

Annoying.

“You are welcome to join me tomorrow, if you so choose,” Pure Vanilla says softly. “There is much more to this Kingdom than you’ve seen through my eyes.”

Shadow Milk sneers. “Oh? I’m free to roam? Do as I please? And here I thought you wanted me all tucked away in this room, nice and *quiet*.”

“Doing ‘as you please’ is not something I can promise, considering the capriciousness of *your* whims.” Pure Vanilla tilts his head, trying to catch the gaze that Shadow Milk is

stubbornly averting. “But you never forbade me from leaving when I was in your home. As long as I have say, you will never be caged here.”

Shadow Milk finally lowers his gaze. “You know I would have crushed you into pieces if you’d tried to leave.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla replies evenly, “but still, there was a choice. I will not make you a prisoner here.”

And *oh*, how that draws a sneer to Shadow Milk’s face. His fist grasps the front of Pure Vanilla’s robes, violently hoisting him into the air as the other lets out a startled noise. He then pulls them in close, locking their gazes as Pure Vanilla struggles in his grip.

“Make no mistake, *Nilly*,” he hisses. “We are **both** prisoners.”

His grip slackens and Pure Vanilla drops to the ground. There’s a small stumble, a wince and sharp inhale of breath.

Shadow Milk can’t help but roll his eyes.

“Fine,” he sighs, massaging his temples. His headache is back, and he’s – tired, too. Tired of this, tired of fighting the inevitable just because this Cookie –

This damned Cookie –

“Let’s just-” Shadow Milk inhales, exhales. Claps his hands together, Joker smile back on his face. “Aw shucks, I was probably too rough on a little old thing like you, huh? You know I just get so *cranky* when I’m cooped up. Brings back **bad memories**, little bit of a sensitive subject. You understand.”

Pure Vanilla’s straightening up, using his staff for leverage as he looks Shadow Milk up and down. Quiet wariness replacing what had been an open hand.

Deserved, perhaps.

“Are we-?”

“Yes,” Shadow Milk interrupts. “Yes, *alright*. I’ve got a splitting headache anyway, all this pestering isn’t helping my-” He waves a lazy hand around the room.

Pure Vanilla follows the motion, scanning the destruction left by what used to be furniture. “There isn’t anywhere left to sit, though. Could you-?”

Shadow Milk sighs dramatically, rolling his cane – with a creaking groan, the bed on the ceiling flips over, dropping down with a shaking crash to the floor. Pure Vanilla flinches at the impact, a small frown creasing his brow.

“You know, you probably just woke half the castle.”

“Really?” Shadow Milk drawls. “I so graciously accommodate, and that’s your thanks? Is this *really* how you want this to go?”

“I suppose not.” Pure Vanilla’s already settling on the edge of the bed, hands folding in his lap. “You are trying.”

He’s not, but he’ll take it. With a heavy sigh, Shadow Milk floats over next to him, settling just inches away on the bedspread. A lazy glance over and Pure Vanilla is still resolutely staring down at his hands, clenching and unclenching the fabric of his robe.

He always gets so nervous when they do this.

Like it isn’t his fault in the first place.

Shadow Milk’s gaze drifts absently down, down to the Soul Jam tucked neatly against the other’s chest. It gleams, even in the dim light, even after all of Shadow Milk’s futile attempts to snuff out every bit of light within. In their mutual silence it hums, rings, pulses – louder and louder as Shadow Milk leans in closer.

His own is singing in reply.

The first time they’d done this had been the strangest – the worst. They hadn’t known, couldn’t have possibly known. Only base instincts had saved them, if one could even call them that.

Shadow Milk had even ignored the pull the first time, chalking it up to nothing more than phantom pain. Back then, all those months ago, when he’d been licking his wounds in the safety of his other realm and soothing his bruised ego as best he could. Everything felt aggravated by the whines and cajoling of his minions; their worship and praise of him had just been salt on the wound. He’d attributed the burning in his chest and shifting dreams of gold to nightmares, to –

Well, *he* didn’t get trauma. *Other* Cookies got trauma. He got something else. Annoyed, perhaps.

Yet the dreams, above all else, had persisted. Shimmering fields of wheat, the bleats of lambs, a calling ringing in his ears pursued him night after night. Each dream a little different, always bright and full of *him*, that wretched face that plagued even his waking hours. They’d been irritating, and yes, his Soul Jam had burned hotter and hotter each night but they were remnants, a memory of that brief moment where two had become one, where he’d been, they’d been –

He doesn’t really remember what he’d thought after that, because an all-consuming pain had blanketed everything else.

It had – hurt. Hurt more than anything he can remember, hurt more than his battles or banishing, or even the first time one of his limbs threatened to crumble. And hurt –

Hurt had made him desperate.

Shadow Milk had, unfortunately, had the upper hand. Pure Vanilla wouldn't know where to find him – but he'd known exactly where the other would be.

There had been some small, warped solace that when he'd slithered out of the shadows in the other's room, when he'd stood to drink in the crumpled and shaking body of his foe, he'd known the pain was mutual.

“Shadow Milk?”

He's drawn out of his thoughts by a light touch to his shoulder; he shrugs it off, and Pure Vanilla's hand withdraws. “Come on,” he sighs, leaning forward. “I know you've been just *dying* without me. You look it, anyway.”

Pure Vanilla shifts closer, slow and careful. No matter how many times it's been, he never seems to lose that nervousness. Always tentative, like he's afraid Shadow Milk's going to spook. Like he's handling a wild beast.

Perhaps there's some detestable truth in that.

There's a gentle thump as the tip of their foreheads touch; Pure Vanilla's eyes flutter shut, and Shadow Milk allows his to do the same.

Their hands find their Soul Jams, grasping around the frames as they sing, quivering in anticipation for the inevitable. This close, Shadow Milk can feel their pull down to his very core – his hands move blindly, pulling his own brooch forward as Pure Vanilla does the same.

There's a breath, a moment of hesitation from no one but themselves.

A soft *clink* as their Jams touch is the only warning they're given before the world melts away.

The feeling is – indescribable. Nothing like that night atop the spire, nothing like anything before or since. It is music and movement and a blur of blues and blacks, white and golds that blend and swirl beneath his eyelids. Songs he'll never know whisper to him as he stands atop a mountain, beneath the sea, against the backdrop of the starry sky. He is a droplet in a river that flows in spirals around the moon. He dances on a stage that's strung up by golden thread. He is a prophet, a king, a god. He is dust. He is afraid, except he is not – never afraid, never alone because there is a hand clasped in his, tight and strong as everything comes undone and reforms in each blink of an eye.

He is a Fount, and he is himself, but two of him stand eye to eye and whisper something so sweet that it brings him to his knees.

He wants to remember, but he doesn't, and then the music starts up again.

Shadow Milk is never sure how long it's supposed to last.

Most times they wake in the privacy of a room, dazed and sprawled into whatever chair or surface they'd been sitting on after only a few minutes. The first time they'd been too close, clutching each other chest to chest in angry, pained desperation. A vicious embrace that had

not ended until two guards had found them the next morning, ripping them apart with spear tips to Shadow Milk's throat. He barely remembers escaping, slipping away still reeling from the daze of golds and blues in a haze that had not cleared for yet another day as he'd sworn, cheeks burning in shame, that he was not to be blamed for a singular fit of hysteria.

When the burning sensation in his Jam returned, he'd leveled a mountain in his rage.

There'd been – some amusement, at least, in sneaking around. In Pure Vanilla's embarrassment, his desperation to hide their *affliction* from prying eyes. It had grown fun to toy with his reluctance, to wait out the agony by watching Pure Vanilla's own from the shadows. To see him wallow in his wretched, pathetic guilt, knowing Shadow Milk felt the same pain he did. That it was *his fault*.

One stupid little trick at the spire. That's all it had taken. Now he's left playing *pet* for his own soul's thief.

The irritation flowing through him must mean it's wearing off.

Shadow Milk slowly sits up, vision swimming as he groans. He rubs at his forehead, blearily taking in the still-settling sights of the room. His room.

His room in the Vanilla Kingdom, perfectly placed under Pure Vanilla's thumb.

A raspy, irritated growl echoes down his throat.

There's a small sound; Shadow Milk's gaze drops tiredly to the other slumped beside him. Pure Vanilla's lashes are fluttering, beckoning him back to the waking world. He looks small like this, dazed and confused. Vulnerable.

Breakable.

Shadow Milk passes a hand over Pure Vanilla's brooch – the Jam hums beneath his touch, but it does not warm. It does not call to him like before, does not accept him anymore. Pure Vanilla had claimed it too thoroughly, stamped his own essence into what is *rightfully* Shadow Milk's.

Still, it resonates with his own half. That's something, a small solace. It is a chance that maybe, just maybe. If Pure Vanilla falls, if he willingly takes the step just once more-

Well. All things in good time.

Pure Vanilla's eyes crack open; Shadow Milk swiftly snatches his hand away. Pure Vanilla's lidded gaze half-follows the movement before he groans, burying his face deeper into the sheets.

Small. Weak. Pathetic.

Like a baby bird.

Shadow Milk instantly dismisses the thought from his mind, giving Pure Vanilla's shoulder a rough shove. "Hey. Show's over. Don't you know it's *rude* to stick around? Change is on the nightstand, toots."

Pure Vanilla groans again, but this time his eyes open in full. He wearily pushes himself up, getting to his feet as he absently brushes back the hair from his eyes. His stance is unsteady, swaying a bit before catching himself as he sighs. "How long-"

"Don't know," Shadow Milk sing-songs. "And, don't care. Buh-bye now."

Pure Vanilla vacantly shuffles over to the door, bending down to grasp half-blindly at his coat before shoving his crown on his head. It lays askew, tilting to the right as Shadow Milk grins at the sight.

Really, truly pathetic.

"Shadow Milk."

Pure Vanilla's voice cuts through the quiet; Shadow Milk allows his own languid gaze to drift up to meet Pure Vanilla's own.

"Yes?"

A beat, before Pure Vanilla continues: "I'd like you to be happy here."

Oh.

Oh, and isn't that *funny*?

A wicked smile creases Shadow Milk's lips; a bubble of laughter slips past, then another, and another. His throat clenches, a slew of giggles bursting out like a dam crumbling at his feet. He laughs, and laughs, and laughs, sides aching and chest heaving as he falls forward, clutching at himself as peals of laughter tear through him.

Oh, it feels *good* to laugh like that.

By the time Shadow Milk wiping at his eyes, still grinning ear to ear, Pure Vanilla has dressed in full, waiting at the edge of the door and watching him with tired eyes. It's to his credit that he hasn't left yet; Pure Vanilla did make for a *wonderful* audience when he chose to.

"Oh," Shadow Milk sighs, another giggle tricking out as he stands. "Oh, you always did know how to make me laugh, Silly Nilly. Pretending like you don't know why I'm here."

He glides upwards, hovering high above as he looks down at Pure Vanilla and bares his teeth in a wicked grin. "Dollface, this room is just the appetizer! The amuse-bouche for what I'm going to do to your *tiny*, insignificant speck of a kingdom, that you have so *graciously* welcomed me into with open arms." He tilts his head, neck cracking as his smile widens. "After all, what are **friends** for if not to liven up each other's day, hm?"

Pure Vanilla's patient stare is steady; the only sign he's listening is the straightening of his back as he holds Shadow Milk's gaze.

"What?" Shadow Milk presses. "Nothing to say? Not *my* fault we're bound, now is it? I'd say my version of our, ah, *cosmic intertwining* went a whole lot better than yours. Regretful, are we?"

"Tomorrow."

Shadow Milk tilts his head farther, slipping the joints entirely. "Hm? Tomorrow what?"

"Tomorrow," Pure Vanilla continues, "my evening will be free. After the sun sets, there's a blue moon garden I'd like to take you to."

"... hah?"

"I've never been, but White Lily says it's very beautiful at night." Pure Vanilla turns towards the door, palm on the handle. "I think you'll like it."

Shadow Milk's eyes narrow to slits.

"Get out."

The sight of Pure Vanilla's back brings him no relief, nor the lock clicking into place. Not even hurling the wooden remains of what had been a dresser at the door does enough to itch the irritation crawling down Shadow Milk's spine.

With a huff he floats back down, collapsing on the bed and rubbing at his forehead. He grabs at the sheets, pulling them over himself as he rolls on his side and stares venomously into the darkness.

A hand reaches up to rub at his Soul Jam; Shadow Milk's scowl deepens.

It's humming again.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome! This comment was added in after the completion of the work, but I wanted to take the time to thank everyone who helped encourage me to bring it to completion!

If you are a new reader, I love comments! I check them daily, and while I cannot reply while under Anon, I do treasure each and every one. If you'd like to live react, leave detailed messages, anything at all, I do see and appreciate it!

You have free permission to book-bind this work and translate it to other languages with credit. I can also be found as @jambound on Twitter!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's a discomfoting familiarity to this place.

Shadow Milk drifts lazily through sun-touched halls, past rows of portraits and statues all gleaming in their pristine glory. Spotless rolls of cream carpet lead him down corridor to corridor, the same waffle-cone pattern lining the walls and floors no matter which way he turns. Even more nauseatingly, the same five shades of light glimmer from stained sugar-glass windows over and over and over; to say Pure Vanilla held sentimentality towards his band of 'Ancient Heroes' would be putting it mildly.

A heavy sigh is the only sound that breaks the quiet as Shadow Milk twirls his cane and contemplates just exactly *why* he is out here.

There'd been a kernel of truth in what he'd said to Pure Vanilla – always is, in any good dash of deceit. He doesn't do well with captivity, voluntary or otherwise. Tight quarters leave the phantom feeling of silver bars at his throat, and it's not a sensation he's willing to tolerate for long.

Still, it's not much better out here. For all the revolting humility that Pure Vanilla likes to conduct himself with, the degree of ostentatiousness around here is astounding.

Shadow Milk's gaze drifts upwards to yet another gargantuan portrait of Pure Vanilla, hung with care above a golden plaque. The other Cookie looms larger than life over him, eyes closed with a forever-still smile painted upon his lips and a Cream Sheep held in his arms. The artist had painted a sort of halo around him, a glow that frames him oh-so-perfectly in the light. He looks perfect, pristine. Untouchable.

Without thinking, Shadow Milk's cane rises; a quick tap and the painting changes, twisting in a blur of black and blue. A snarling Cake Hound now lay where the sheep had been, sinking its fangs into its owner's arm – an owner whose once-serene face was now clenched in a silent scream.

Shadow Milk smiles to himself.

Better.

The sight is so tickling that he finds his cane raising yet again, sweeping across the air as the hallway distorts around him. Golden sunbeams are banished as darkness swallows his surroundings; when his hand lowers once more, gone are all the glaring hallmarks of Pure Vanilla's oh-so-perfect world. Now, Shadow Milk gazes down the spitting image of what had once been his own spire's walkway, familiar eyes emblazoned on every surface that wink back at him in the dark.

Much better.

There's a clatter behind him, a small gasp that pulls his attention around. His neck swivels, cracking audibly as his gaze lands on a small, trembling cookie standing in the entryway. There's an empty tray of now-scattered sweets laid out at her feet; her hands fly to her mouth in abject horror.

Shadow Milk's grin widens, every sharpened tooth on display.

The cookie shrieks, turning on her heels to flee, and a shiver of excitement runs down Shadow Milk's back.

Finally. Some *fun*.

The chase is not difficult; he's faster than she could ever hope to be with those small, delightfully terrified steps. He leaves room between them as he flies after her down the hallways, just close enough to hear her terrified gasps, close enough to make her scream as he blows a breath down her back before cackling in her ear.

Her fear is palpable, filling the once-quiet rooms with shrieks of open terror as they tear through the castle –

And it is so, *so* funny.

He's still giggling to himself as she turns a corner abruptly, so lost in his own delight that he nearly smacks his head into the next archway. He hisses, dipping low as she frantically scurries through a swinging door that opens into-

Oh. Not what he expected.

A large kitchen sprawls out before him, stopping him momentarily in his tracks as he takes in the surroundings. Enormous lines of polished countertops and gleaming stovetops glint beneath the chandeliers above, light bouncing off rows upon rows of jars filled with sugar and jam packed tightly into corners. A subtle coffee aroma fills the air – which is made altogether stranger that such a massive room seems so empty.

Well. *Almost* empty.

The little cookie girl is trembling in a corner, trying to hide her tiny frame beneath a stray jar lid. Shadow Milk floats closer, hovering menacingly with a wicked grin as he reaches forward-

"I see you're out of your room."

Despicable how such a calm, steady voice can stop him in his tracks.

Shadow Milk levies a poisonous look to his left; there in the adjacent doorway, Pure Vanilla stands with a steaming mug in hand. He even has the gall to sip at it delicately before his gaze finally rises up to meet Shadow Milk's own. "You seem to be in high spirits today."

An ugly smirk is on Shadow Milk's face before he can stop it, cane twirling in his palm as he turns to face the other. "What, no good morning?"

"Good morning," Pure Vanilla repeats back. "I'd advise you to stop teasing the staff now."

Shadow Milk scoffs. "*Advise* me? And, pray tell, *why* exactly would I be seeking *your* advice?"

Pure Vanilla doesn't respond at first; there's another slow, patient sip through half-lidded eyes that pinches Shadow Milk's brow with irritation. Finally, there's a quiet, simple:

"Cuccidati Cookie?"

The blow to the back of his head is immediate; Shadow Milk barely has time to exhale a startled gasp before something tightens around his chest and he is pulled, yanked harshly to the floor. There is a beat, a moment of processing as he tilts his chin, staring down in disbelief at the licorice rope wrapped tight around his torso.

"Thank you, my dear." Pure Vanilla's voice cuts through the shocked silence like a knife. "You may go."

And oh, that Cookie – that small, frightened little cookie steps forward, darting on the cusp of Shadow Milk's vision as she dips into a low curtsy before them. And then she is gone, darting away through the double doors and out of sight.

Shadow Milk closes his eyes – when they re-open, he *burns*.

The ropes melt off him as he rises, pooling on the floor as he ascends in building, seething fury. He directs every inch of his vicious gaze towards Pure Vanilla as he flies across the countertops, sweeping his cane to send mixers and bowls flying every which way. The din of their clattering drowns out his angry breaths as he stops inches away from the other, and Pure Vanilla –

Pure Vanilla smiles at him.

Shadow Milk physically recoils at the sight.

"My apologies." Pure Vanilla tilts his head slightly, swirling his mug. "I had hoped you'd see the humor in my little trick. Though, I will say that a fair warning *was* given."

"Trick?" Shadow Milk hisses venomously. "That wasn't a trick, that was-"

Humiliating. A cheap shot, a foul play, a-

A trick. A trick? Pure Vanilla was playing tricks on him?

"I'm certain you've noticed the castle's emptiness by now." Pure Vanilla steps past him, as if totally blind to the vicious snarl on Shadow Milk's face. "I thought it might make your adjustment a bit easier if there were a few less Cookies around while you're still getting your

bearings.” He pulls up a stool at the nearest counter, settling down with one hand around his mug as the other –

Pats the seat beside him.

Oh, he *must* be joking.

Pure Vanilla’s hand withdraws; the look of poisonous refusal must be plain on Shadow Milk’s face, because the other simply continues with: “Still, some staff is needed to keep things running. So I hand-picked a few close friends to remain, with temperaments better suited to ease the transition.”

Shadow Milk stares him down from across the counter. “Hand-picked,” he repeats dangerously.

“Cuccidati Cookie was quite the trapper back in the village,” Pure Vanilla muses. “Ever eager to help. Her specialty was... I suppose the term would be ‘luring prey’?”

Shadow Milk’s grip on his cane tightens. “Oh,” he says slowly, voice sickeningly sweet. “Oh, how *adorable*! You two are comparing me to prey? Me? ***Shadow Milk Cookie***? Do I have that right?”

The room darkens, lamps overhead snuffing out in quick succession.

“I asked her to go and find you.” Pure Vanilla watches him steadily; there is a wariness now, trying to stay hidden beneath a revoltingly stubborn smile. “Perhaps I misjudged your fondness for trickery, but I did not think you’d come if I simply asked for your presence. I thought egging you into a chase might be more...”

Fun.

That’s what it had been, hadn’t it? Fun, woven along a sinful thread of deceit pulled by Pure Vanilla’s hand.

Beneath the simmering anger, Shadow Milk feels another tug at his Soul Jam; he clamps down on the sensation, *hard*.

“Regardless,” Pure Vanilla continues. “I wanted to ask you something.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow; his emotions feel jumbled, heady anger mixing with an annoying sting of intrigue. His grip flexes experimentally on his cane, twirling it once as he takes a breath to compose himself.

“Oh?” He tilts his head, eyes widening in mock curiosity as he floats closer. “A question just for me? I’m *so* honored. Let me guess – you want to know how many tiny, little crumbly pieces I’m thinking of turning you into right now! Personally I think a thousand would be *far* too messy, but hey, I’m open to suggestions.”

“That’s a shame.” Pure Vanilla takes another sip from his mug. “I thought we might play a game instead.”

Shadow Milk can feel his brow imperceptibly perk. “Really.”

“You like games.”

“Everybody likes games.” Shadow Milk taps his cane on his foot. “Why should I play one with you? I had plans today myself, you know.”

“More redecorating?” Pure Vanilla’s gaze travels back to the doorway. “I passed by some of your work on my way here.”

“Aw,” Shadow Milk sneers. “Are you a fan?”

Pure Vanilla, infuriatingly, smiles back. “You wouldn’t be happy if I was.”

“Too bad!” Shadow Milk floats another foot upwards, flipping upside-down as he grins wickedly. “I may just get my foot in the business. Really give this place a good Shadow Milk Cookie makeover, make it *pop*. I think everyone’s getting a *little* tired of seeing your dewy-eyed mug plastered everywhere, hm?”

Pure Vanilla’s gaze follows him up; Shadow Milk barely understands why. He’s stared out of those eyes himself time and time again; from this distance, Shadow Milk would be nothing more than a hazy blur of color.

“Would you like to play me for it?”

Shadow Milk’s brow creases. “What?”

“Play me for it,” Pure Vanilla repeats, pushing himself off his stool. “If you win, you may redecorate the castle to your liking. Though I will ask that you revert the changes before the full staff returns.”

The proposal is laughable – literally. Shadow Milk snorts in disbelief, flipping around in the air once again. “Excuse me? Why exactly would I need to *play* you for that? I fail to see the part where you-” He jabs his cane at Pure Vanilla for emphasis. “-have even the teensiest, tiniest way of stopping me.”

“That’s true.” Pure Vanilla sets his now-empty mug on the counter, brushing at his robes. “You have the power to do as you wish. I would be wholly unable to stop you.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “So?”

“So,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “Wouldn’t it be more fun to beat me before you do?”

The suspicion does not abate, but Shadow Milk is – intrigued, albeit reluctantly. There’s a mischievous glimmer behind Pure Vanilla’s eyes; that, in itself, is rare. “You seem confident that I’ll win,” he drawls, eyeing the other up and down. “So sure of your own shortcomings?”

“Really?” Pure Vanilla muses. “I think we’ll be on rather equal footing. Perhaps you’re just afraid to lose?”

A taunt. Open, brash and daring – for him, anyway. How unusual.

Shadow Milk's mouth slowly twists into a wicked grin.

How *refreshing*.

"Alright." Shadow Milk lowers himself back down, hovering so that he and Pure Vanilla are eye to eye. "Color me intrigued, you silly, simple little thing. What's the game?"

Pure Vanilla smiles. "I was thinking Hide and Seek."

Hm. Not exactly the most exciting proposition in a place like this. And, more obviously-

"Uh, *hello*?" Shadow Milk raps his knuckles on Pure Vanilla's forehead, earning a small wince from the other. "I know you're one bad fall away from crumbling of old age, but you do still remember that I can see through you? *Lit-er-ally*? You're not exactly giving me much of a challenge here."

Pure Vanilla gently pushes his hand away. "I didn't mean you'd be searching for me. I suppose it's more of a scavenger hunt, though you'd be looking for just one item."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "What, lost your bunny slippers? Going senile in your old age?"

There's a small quirk to Pure Vanilla's brow. "You are much, much older than me."

"And yet," Shadow Milk sighs, tossing a hand through his hair, "still as effortlessly handsome as the day I was baked. Truly, how *do* I do it?"

There's an amused eye roll from Pure Vanilla. "May I continue?"

"Jealous, much?"

"Listen. I'll tell you a riddle, alright?" Pure Vanilla motions to the door with his staff. "You're looking for something in the castle. Solve the riddle to find the item I'm looking for, then bring it to me before nightfall. You do that, and you win."

Shadow Milk hums, considering as he idly rolls over in the air. "Still doesn't sound like much of a game. Seems to me like you just lost something in that oh-so feeble memory of yours."

"Oh, I know exactly where it is. Though," Pure Vanilla adds, "I admit I would be troubled if you did away with it."

Now *that* sounds interesting. Shadow Milk rights himself, grinning ear to ear. "Did I say not much of a game? Because, believe me, I would absolutely *love* to play with you."

"Wonderful." Pure Vanilla's smile is revoltingly genuine. "Shall we begin?"

"Wait." Shadow Milk holds up a hand. "We haven't outlined all the rules yet. What do you get if *you* win?"

Pure Vanilla pauses, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “Oh! Um...”

“What, seriously?” Shadow Milk gives the other an incredulous once-over. “You go to all this trouble and you don’t even know what you want?”

“I suppose I didn’t think you’d offer.”

“Wh-” Shadow Milk sputters indignantly. “I’m not *offering*! You’re the one who made this about stakes! It’s hardly a real game if only one side is-!” He waves a hand dismissively, irritation creeping back in. “Ugh, forget it.”

“No, no,” Pure Vanilla replies quickly. “I know what I want now.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Go on, then. Your audience is just *dying* to know – but let me guess. You want me to, what, clothe the sick? Feed the poor? Spread *wight* and *wuv*?”

“If I win, you come to the blue moon garden with me tonight.”

Shadow Milk blinks.

“What?”

“The blue moon garden.” Pure Vanilla tilts his head ever so slightly. “I mentioned it to you the night before.”

Shadow Milk stares down at him in disbelief. “You have the opportunity,” he says slowly, “to ask the Beast of Deceit, the Master of Chaos to do anything - *anything* - and *you* want *me* to go stand around in a bunch of stupid flowers.”

“Yes.”

Absurd. Infuriatingly so.

Shadow Milk scoffs, floating higher out of reach. “Whatever. Not like it’ll matter either way.” He gives Pure Vanilla a distasteful once-over, folding his arms across his chest.

“Go on, then. Give me your riddle.”

--

Shadow Milk’s cane trails along the castle walls as he glides through the corridors, turning Pure Vanilla’s words over and over in his mind.

My eyes are open, but unseeing. My limbs lay lightly, but cannot move. I am the sight you treasure most in this world, and hide where none but you would find me. What am I?

It's more of a riddle than he'd expected from the other; frankly, he'd been half-bracing for some cutesy, rhyming nonsense. The words aren't terribly clever, lack the certain flair that Shadow Milk brings to his own games, but Pure Vanilla had at least not insulted him by making it *obvious*.

Shadow Milk hums thoughtfully to himself, drumming his cane in his palm as he picks apart his options. The first, immediate thought had been a mirror – after all, what better sight than his own? Yet it hadn't quite fit - he certainly had no trouble seeing his own reflection and his limbs remained as free and flexible as ever.

There had been a brief, irritated musing that Pure Vanilla had had the gall to suggest himself, blind as a bat that he was. Still, that hadn't felt right either; while he may have slowed with age, Pure Vanilla was fully capable of moving about.

The sight you treasure most.

What exactly did Pure Vanilla think he treasured? The riddle felt far too objective, too open to misinterpretations from the other. Deceit, the only true fundamental core of his being, was a concept, a living, breathing creation - not a simple object to hold in hand.

Was Pure Vanilla trying to guess his interests? Or had he just concocted a game that was flawed from the start?

Shadow Milk scowls to himself before discarding the idea entirely. No. Pure Vanilla was annoying, presumptuous, altogether the most pathetic thing Shadow Milk had ever laid eyes on –

Well. That's where his thoughts begin and end, really.

There was something Shadow Milk was missing, something beyond the riddle's simple words. What else had Pure Vanilla said? What had slipped through the cracks?

Oh, I know exactly where it is. Though, I admit I would be troubled if you did away with it.

Pure Vanilla's easy certainty in the first statement was – interesting. If he was so confident of the location, he must have seen the object recently. They'd spoken early in the morning hours; while it trailed towards evening now, it did mean that Pure Vanilla could not have gone far before their encounter in the kitchen.

Perhaps he'd passed the object off to the miserable little Cuccidati Cookie? Shadow Milk had already taken the time to scour the grounds for her to no avail; she may be in hiding, or have left the premises entirely. A wise decision on her part, really.

Still, that didn't feel like an angle Pure Vanilla would take. A moving object defeats the point of the game, the riddle itself. Pure Vanilla was many things, but he wasn't a bad player.

So what would he have seen on his way to the kitchens? It may be impossible to tell how many rooms the other could have dipped in and out of – but there at least would have been one starting point Shadow Milk can be sure of.

Pure Vanilla's bedroom.

It's as solid a place to peruse as any - though admittedly, Shadow Milk has never entered it properly. All of their previous secret, soul-touching rendez-vous had been a simple matter of slipping in and out of his portals in the dead of night; Shadow Milk isn't actually certain where in the castle it would be.

But, well. Why fix what already worked?

A wave of his cane and Shadow Milk is slipping back through the darkness, sliding along shadows that dip through the cracks of reality. He knows the route by heart; it only takes a few moments before a familiar Cream Wool rug solidifies under his feet. He takes a few steps forward, letting the portal's inky wisps drip from his back as he surveys his oh-too familiar surroundings.

He truly doesn't understand how Pure Vanilla sleeps like this.

There is far, far too much light for one simple room. It's a tolerable enough place to visit in the dark of the night, but the evening sun glaring through stained sugar-glass windows pinches Shadow Milk's brow into a pained squint. The chandelier above burns brightly despite the room's notable lack of occupants – even the bedside lamp is still flicked on.

Does Pure Vanilla just leave everything like this all day? Did he anticipate coming back so late at night as to need it?

Blind as a bat indeed.

Shadow Milk rubs irritably at his eyes as he floats through the room, squinting gaze darting this way and that as he scans the area. There's nothing that grabs his attention immediately; he's seen all this before. He drifts by a desk, piled high with documents that Pure Vanilla spends hours scribbling away at with quills, then a bookcase that's stuffed to the breaking point with musty old tomes. There's plush reading chair, gleaming bedside tables and dressers with neatly-pressed robes lined in a row. The most grandiose object by fair is the king-sized bed and its glittering silken sheets, an object Shadow Milk is reluctantly well-acquainted with.

The sheets are, annoyingly, perfectly tucked.

Of course.

There's no obvious answers that stand out to him as Shadow Milk drifts to and fro; he checks the cabinets, the shelves, even the adjacent breakfast nook to no avail. Everything seems as banal as he'd expected. No clues, no hints. If anything it feels like a deader end than before – there's certainly nothing around here that *he* would treasure.

There'd been a sliver of enjoyment in shriveling the white lily by the windowsill, at least.

Shadow Milk sighs to himself, crossing his arms as he massages the tip of his forehead. What else? What else had that pest of a Cookie said? What was he missing?

And hide where none but you would find me.

It *feels* like the line should be pertinent; most Cookies would never dream of setting foot in Pure Vanilla's bedroom unannounced. Yet still, there were servants about, Cookies to sweep up the messes and press his stupid little robes into crisp perfection. Shadow Milk can't have been the only Cookie in here, even just for today.

So what else *is* there?

Shadow Milk taps his cane against his palm, squinting around the room. Even if he presumes he's in the right place, how was he supposed to see anything like this? It's too nauseatingly bright, lacking a single sliver of soothing darkness anywhere except-

Except.

Shadow Milk's gaze slowly drifts down, down to the massive bed that lies stage center in the room. He lowers himself, gliding an inch from the floor as he cocks his head at the shadowed space beneath the bed-frame.

Darkness. Weak, flickering darkness – but darkness nonetheless.

None but you.

He reaches out, his hand sliding through dust as he feels blindly underneath. There's a touch, a light brush against something cold – he leans in closer, grasping until his hands find purchase on something metallic. A hinge?

Shadow Milk pulls hard, tugging the object as it catches briefly on the bed's slats. Another yank, then two, and the object pops free, tumbling out of Shadow Milk's grasp and sliding gently across the floor.

A box.

A small wooden chest, no larger than a simple loaf of bread. It's unassuming, chipped and worn. It lacks the grandiose golds and whites of the rest of their surroundings, looking almost crude in comparison – like it had been fashioned by a pair of inexperienced hands.

A grin splits Shadow Milk's face in two.

He lunges for his prize, grabbing it in greedy hands before turning it side to side. There's no switch, no key taped to the underside – just a simple metal clasp that he undoes with a flick of his wrist. Shadow Milk's hands seize each lid, violently wrenching them open as he leans in for his prize. Then-

He freezes.

The room feels too quiet now. There's an unnatural stillness, a deathly silence that settles into a swiftly darkening room as the grin slowly drops from Shadow Milk's face.

Oh.

He continues to stare motionlessly down into the box, grasp on it loosening with each passing moment. After several moments he turns it over, dropping the object into his open palm. He brings it up to his face, staring it down for what feels like hours.

It's the answer. Shadow Milk's confidence in that is absolute, at least. Yet a new trickle of uncertainty narrows his gaze - an unbidden, unwelcome question now hangs in the air around him.

For a brief, flickering moment, Shadow Milk considers if he truly wants to win.

--

“Hey, *Nilly!*”

Two mismatched eyes turn upwards, a milky gaze that widens in surprise as Shadow Milk pulls back his arm, bares his teeth in a grin and-

Thwack!

The sound the doll makes as it collides with Pure Vanilla's face dispels all doubts.

This had definitely been worth it.

Pure Vanilla lets out a muffled squawk, doubling over as he covers his face with both hands. “Wh- *Shadow Milk!*”

Shadow Milk clutches his sides, peals of cackling laughter filling the evening air as he grins ear-to-ear. His grin only widens as Pure Vanilla wipes and sputters crossly, massaging the spot the doll had made impact before directing an openly cross look upwards. “Shadow Milk,” he repeats and oh, the *stern* voice is back. “That wasn't funny.”

“Now, now, Nilly. Is that any way to talk to a victor on the eve of his triumph? One might think you're being a bad loser.” Shadow Milk twirls his cane once, then motions with it to the ground. “By the way, your little pests are eating my prize.”

Pure Vanilla follows his gaze, starting briefly before hastily bending back down. “No, hey, no! Give that here!”

Shadow Milk watches with mild amusement as a surprisingly bulky Cream Sheep stares back at the other, the doll clenched firmly between its teeth. The rest of the flock milling about the pasture pay them no mind aside from a few stray sniffs, but this one turns, pulls back from Pure Vanilla's grasping touch. There's a slow, almost methodical air to it as it stubbornly chews away, slobber and spit crushing the fabric between its teeth.

Pure Vanilla groans and pulls, tugging back and forth as the sheep stubbornly clamps down. There's another tug, an irritable bleat-

Riiiiip!

Shadow Milk doesn't try to stifle his snort as Pure Vanilla stumbles backwards, landing solidly in the dirt. The other barely seems to notice, his dismayed gaze fixed on the shredded remnants in hand.

Two little diamond-patterned legs dangle helplessly in his palms.

"Hey, not a total loss." Shadow Milk floats lower, eyeing the remains with a smile. "Some say those are my best features."

Pure Vanilla sighs, low and quiet; he doesn't look up, not even when Shadow Milk gives the tip of his hat a condescending pat.

"You know," Shadow Milk continues, "I'm a bit disappointed in you, Silly Vanilly. I know you're a bleeding heart but really, this was just *sad*. What did you expect to accomplish, hm? Did you really think I'd be moved by your little display of *sentimentality*?"

No response. Pure Vanilla continues to stare miserably down, giving Shadow Milk nothing but silence.

Stubborn. Boring.

"Come on." Shadow Milk flicks the other's forehead. "Why so serious? That thing was already falling apart to begin with."

"It was buried."

Shadow Milk tilts his head. "Hm? What's that?"

"It was buried," Pure Vanilla repeats; he's getting to his feet, putting his weight on his staff as he rises. "In the rubble of the spire." His hand is clenched tight, stubbornly refusing to let go of the paltry remains. "That's where I found it."

"And what," Shadow Milk drawls, "you thought I'd be oh-so touched because you picked up my trash?"

"I didn't do it for you." Pure Vanilla's looking away, refusing to meet his gaze. His attention is on the ground, the sheep – anywhere but Shadow Milk. "I took it as a reminder."

Shadow Milk's eyes narrow to slits. He thrusts an arm out, grabbing Pure Vanilla by the chin, yanking him forward and forcing their eyes to lock. There's a beat, a brief struggle as Pure Vanilla tries to pull away – but Shadow Milk holds him fast.

"You don't need a **reminder**," he hisses, drawing every word out. "I'm **right here**."

Pure Vanilla stills in his grasp. There's a hesitation, a held breath as Pure Vanilla's wide eyes stare back, expression unreadable.

Then his eyes lid, gaze averting down to the ground once more.

Annoying. Pathetic. Stubborn, sentimental old fool.

“Congratulations.”

The reply is monotone; Pure Vanilla is already tilting his head away, yanking himself free from Shadow Milk’s loosening grasp. He turns away towards the sheep, *daring* to put his back to Shadow Milk before he continues: “You won the game. You may do to the castle as you wish.”

Annoying.

Annoying, *annoying*, ***annoying***.

Shadow Milk grits his teeth at the image of Pure Vanilla’s back, clutching at his chest as his Soul Jam twinges painfully. He can feel it, the other’s detestable unhappiness bleeding through like a poison – a dull throb of, of all things, *disappointment*.

He *likes* it when Pure Vanilla is unhappy. He *likes* it when the other’s face twists in shock, horror, dismay.

But games aren’t fun if the other isn’t willing to play.

Shadow Milk sighs, loud and dramatic – loud enough to earn him an unhappy glance backwards before Pure Vanilla turns away again.

Fine. FINE.

“You’re such a sore loser, Nilly.” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes before pointing his cane at the other. “Come on, give me that thing.”

Pure Vanilla turns in full, a startled sound escaping as the plush’s remains slip from his hands. He tries grasping at them but the tattered legs are already floating up out of reach. They glide through the air, coming to a stop a few feet away from Shadow Milk’s unimpressed stare.

“Honestly,” he drawls, heaving another theatrical sigh, “You are *way* too soft for your own good.”

Shadow Milk flicks his cane; the legs are instantly surrounded by a cocoon of darkness, a rush of silver thread swirling in spirals over and over before coming to an abrupt halt.

Hovering in the air, Shadow Milk eyes over his newly pristine mirror image – albeit a much smaller, plusher one.

Well. At least Pure Vanilla has good taste, he supposes.

“Here,” he says dismissively, flicking his cane again; the plush suddenly drops from the air. He watches as Pure Vanilla’s stunned expression changes to one of momentary surprise, the other stumbling forward to grab at the doll mere seconds before it hit the muddy ground.

Shadow Milk continues to watch, brow perked in growing irritation as Pure Vanilla stares wordlessly down at the toy. Really? Not a single word of thanks?

“A-hem.” Shadow Milk clears his throat pointedly. “Were you raised in a barn? I am *expecting* some adulation here! Such a gracious, magnanimous act from little ol’ moi deserves-”

“Thank you.”

Shadow Milk’s next words stutter to a halt. Pure Vanilla still isn’t looking at him; he’s examining the doll, lifting it up towards the sky with an expression that is shockingly, unnervingly-

Tender.

Something strange twists in Shadow Milk’s chest; his Soul Jam hums oddly, ringing in his ears. The sensation is mutedly foreign, like a brush to the back of his throat that itches in just the wrong way.

Disgusting.

Shadow Milk quickly schools his expression, his trademark grin firmly in place. “Hah! So, so sentimental. Sad, really. Well!” He claps his hands together, pointedly turning away to place his gaze firmly on the castle. “If that’s all it takes to keep an old sap like you happy, I think I’ll go have some *real* fun. Tell me, do you prefer snakes in your closets, or tea pots? Don’t answer that! Let’s just do *both*.”

“Do you want to play again tomorrow?”

A simple question – far too gentled, far too quiet. Shadow Milk’s grip on his cane slightly tightens before he barks out a laugh.

“Lost and already so eager for a rematch? You’ve got moxie, I’ll give you that.” He keeps his back turned away, ignoring the sound of Pure Vanilla stepping closer. There’s a beat of silence, a moment of hesitation before he feels the brush of a touch at his back-

Shadow Milk shrugs his shoulder away, floating upwards and out of reach. “*An-y-way*,” he sing-songs. “I’ve got places to be, castles to crash. Try not to trip and **crumble** in a ditch on your way back, m’kay?”

If Pure Vanilla has a response, it’s lost – Shadow Milk is already flying away, the wind whipping at his face and drowning out all but the muffled bleats of the sheep below. The night is closing in fast around him; blissful darkness spreads across the sky as Shadow Milk soars overhead.

His Jam tingles in the cold; Shadow Milk’s hand unconsciously reaches up, tracing over the brooch and feeling it warm beneath his touch. Like a pup feeling the hand of its master, it thrums greedily - pushing at him. Pleading. Singing with a silent request that roars in his ears.

Shadow Milk ignores it, retracting his hand and setting his sights firmly on the castle ahead.

He has already had more than enough of Pure Vanilla for one day.

Chapter End Notes

- 1) I'm glad you guys are enjoying; I'm definitely taking the remarks about keeping them true to their personalities to heart. Let me know if anything veers, I re-watch cutscenes to try and keep them as close as possible while putting them in Situations.
- 2) Like the comments. Love the comments. More comments are good. Comments are intrinsically tied to my motivation and speed. Please give comments, please, ple
- 3) I am completely unrelated to this artist and the plot is completely separated from this work but I found this Shadowvanilla animation that goes incredibly hard and it only has ~300 views so if you like it go comment on it too because for some reason it plays in my head whenever I'm writing so I think it should get at least partial credit here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-VjrZWGeX4>

Chapter 3

They settle into a sort of routine - one Shadow Milk isn't particularly sure of his feelings on.

Every morning, some way or another, Pure Vanilla will find him and every morning, some way or another, he's concocted some new game for the two of them to play. The variety in them is marginally impressive; he doesn't stick to scavenger hunts alone, at least. Some days they play checkers, some days cards, some days bizarre trivia games whose topics even Shadow Milk's eyes glaze over with unfamiliarity. The gaps in history between his banishment and escape had been large, granted, but perhaps he'd underestimated just how much he missed in between. It feels like Pure Vanilla is not-so-subtly trying to bring him up to speed; or perhaps the other is just making things up as he goes.

If not, Shadow Milk has, apparently, vastly underestimated the ripple effect one Cake Hound with a crown can cause.

While each game is marginally different enough from the rest, there is always a stake, always something to encourage Shadow Milk to reluctantly part from his busy schedule of staring emptily into the void. It's a decent enough way to keep the games fresh; there's really nothing too tantalizing that lies of reach of Shadow Milk's own power, if he so chose. Yet the sight of Pure Vanilla hanging his head in defeat, willingly submitting to Shadow Milk's whims over his domain is deliciously satisfying.

If not a bit familiar.

As many times as Pure Vanilla's tried, he's yet to win a single game. His persistently requested prize – that damned garden – eludes his grasp with effortless ease on Shadow Milk's part. On the flipside, the prize Pure Vanilla offers in return is ever shifting, but always some painfully obvious attempt at bribery to get Shadow Milk to plod forward with the games. Granted, it isn't the worst thing in the world; Pure Vanilla is skilled enough to pose a modicum of a challenge at times and, in truth, Shadow Milk would be crumbling a lot more of his surroundings from boredom without the distraction.

The redecorating had been fun – for a while, at least. Draping his imagery across every nook and cranny, twisting and turning the hallways into spiraling corridors that led back to where they began had provided endless amusement for nearly a week. Watching Pure Vanilla struggle up pathways that slid him back to the bottom over and over had sent Shadow Milk into such a fit of laughter that he'd nearly popped his own head clean off his shoulders. Still, there were only so many times Shadow Milk could watch the other Cookie tumble helplessly down flights of stairs before that too grew stale.

While hesitant at first, Pure Vanilla had acquiesced to the idea of letting Shadow Milk come up with his own rewards – within limits.

“Limits are boring. Why stifle my endless creativity?”

That night found the pair of them in Pure Vanilla's room, a chessboard laid out on the waffle-cone table with two emptied cocoa mugs on either side. Pure Vanilla is hunched over the board in concentration, eyes flicking intensely across the squares – a rather comical sight, considering he's already dressed in his absurdly frilly nightclothes.

"Rules aren't boring." Pure Vanilla hovers a hand over his knight, then removes it. "Games can't be played properly without rules."

Shadow Milk sneers as he watches Pure Vanilla struggle to move against his Bishop. "You're lecturing *me* on games? Such a large ego for such a teensy, crushable Cookie."

"Well," Pure Vanilla replies, finally pushing his knight forward. "As you like to point out, I do take after you."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes and flicks his cane down; Pure Vanilla's crown swiftly jams itself down on the other's head. As Pure Vanilla squawks and struggles, Shadow Milk leans forward to snatch the other's bishop off the board and pops it into his mouth. By the time Pure Vanilla successfully frees himself, Shadow Milk's already lounging back in his chair.

"Hm," he grunts through the chewing, before finally swallowing his prize down. "Go on, then."

Pure Vanilla scans the newly-emptied board and sighs. "Stop cheating."

"How dare you," Shadow Milk drawls. "Such accusations." He flicks his cane, sending his bishop forward; the piece slides across the board before lifting, slamming down on a little white pawn that crumbles from the impact.

Pure Vanilla stares forlornly down. "Dark Cacao Cookie gave me this set."

"Shame on him, then. It tastes terrible."

Pure Vanilla sighs again, refocusing his milky eyes on his dwindling pieces. "One-"

"One what?"

"The first rule. There's three."

Shadow Milk groans audibly.

"One," Pure Vanilla continues, "you may not harm other Cookies within the kingdom."

"Ah, ah." Shadow Milk shakes his head. "Perhaps it's slipped your foolish, insignificant mind, but I've got quite a few enemies in the works. Can't make any promises if someone's coming at me, now can I? Cause if I start to crumble, I'm taking you with me."

"A fair point," Pure Vanilla concedes. "Then you may not harm other Cookies except in self-defense, and within *reason*."

Shadow Milk grins, all teeth. "Reason is so delightfully *subjective*."

“Two.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze is fully on him now. “Do not involve other Cookies in our games. Consequences should remain between us.”

Shadow Milk’s mouth drops into a fake pout. “So cruel! What, I can’t have friends over?”

“If you make other friends, you are more than welcome to invite them to play whatever you wish. Until then...”

A scoff as Shadow Milk’s gaze narrows. “I have friends. Four of them – perhaps *that* rings a bell?”

“Yes, well,” Pure Vanilla hums. “I think the Vanilla Kingdom can only handle one of you five for the time being.” He toys with his rook before finally pushing it forward. “Your move.”

“So selfish.” Shadow Milk flicks his cane, cutting his queen across to H4. “You just want to keep me all to yourself.”

“Funny,” Pure Vanilla replies mildly. “I recall once feeling the same.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow to slits; Pure Vanilla dutifully ignores his gaze, dragging his rook backwards before pausing. “Hm,” he continues with a frown. “I’m a bit stuck here, aren’t I?”

“You’re hopeless, that’s what.” Shadow Milk nods at the board. “You really don’t see it?”

Pure Vanilla lowers his gaze once more, back to studying his futile attempt at a match. It’s not until a full minute of silence passes that Shadow Milk finally prompts: “So?”

A glance up from the other. “So what?”

“So what’s the third of your set of precious rules? You’re keeping me waiting on pins and needles here.”

“Oh.” Pure Vanilla looks away again. “Well, I suppose this one is also subjective. But, I would prefer if you did not harm me as well.”

Shadow Milk’s lips curl in an ugly smile. “*Prefer?* You set hard and fast rules for the wellbeing of other Cookies – but you’d *prefer* I didn’t crumble you into dust?”

Pure Vanilla’s expression shifts slightly, something hesitant flitting across his face before he slips back into neutrality. “Yes.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes again. “You know, they write books about fools with self-sacrificing natures. Mostly about how quickly they’re **squashed** from existence, and how no one remembers anything except how painfully foolish they were.”

“Perhaps,” Pure Vanilla hums noncommittally. “Now let me think.”

The minutes drag by in renewed silence; Shadow Milk’s gaze drifts as he waits, idly observing the room he was so tiresomely acquainted with. The clock above Pure Vanilla’s

bedside chimes thrice; it startles the other, makes him look up in surprise. "It's that late already?"

Shadow Milk shrugs. "Time flies when you take this long to move."

"I wouldn't need to take this long if you'd stop eating the pieces."

Shadow Milk pointedly snaps his teeth at the air; it earns him a soft snort before Pure Vanilla's gaze lowers back to the board.

More minutes crawl by. For every slow, thoughtful move Pure Vanilla makes, Shadow Milk responds with immediate precision. He knocks pawns, knights, Pure Vanilla's last, crumbling little bishop off the board with barely a second glance. Honestly, the whole affair would have already bored him to crumbs if not for the aggravated sighs and groans of the other at each failed play. "You know," he drawls, snapping the head off a recently defeated pawn, "if you're looking for a win, I really wouldn't have picked this game. Pretty sure I've played more games than years than you've been alive."

"There's always a chance." Pure Vanilla moves his last rook to the center with a self-satisfied smile. "Besides, even if I lose, it's an opportunity improve."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "Dollface, you're gonna need a *lot* of opportunities." He slides his queen to B4. "Check."

Pure Vanilla moves his rook to block. "Is that an offer?"

Shadow Milk perks an incredulous brow. "What, you seriously want me to teach you?" He shoves forward a pawn. "Check."

"Why not?" Pure Vanilla studies the board, chin in hand. "I've learned a lot from you already."

Shadow Milk snorts. "Your counterplay doesn't show it."

"I wasn't talking about chess."

Ugh. There it is again, that sickening sincerity Pure Vanilla just *loves* to sprinkle into their talks. Shadow Milk rolls his eyes yet again, sliding his queen over before flicking the other's remaining rook off the board. "You left your flank open. Checkmate."

"Ah, well." Pure Vanilla reaches across the board, tipping his king over in defeat - Shadow Milk's eyes follow the movement with an intensity that feels strange, even for him. Then Pure Vanilla yawns, loud and unapologetic, and Shadow Milk quickly averts his gaze.

"Mm," the other mumbles, rubbing at his eyes. "It's so late. I was supposed to go to bed early, too."

"You're the one who *begged* me to play."

“I did.” Pure Vanilla yawns again. “It was fun.” He pushes himself up, stretching his arms above his head with a deep sigh. “Do you want to-?”

“I’m fine,” Shadow Milk replies shortly.

Pure Vanilla takes his refusal with grace, a single bleary-eyed nod before shuffling off towards his bed. “Well then, have a good-”

“Hold on.” Shadow Milk floats up and over the table, closing their distance as Pure Vanilla drops tiredly onto the bed. “Aren’t we forgetting something?”

There’s a slow, tired blink as Pure Vanilla stares vacantly up at him. “You said you didn’t want to.”

“Not that.” Shadow Milk grins, all teeth. “My prize? Come now, don’t pretend you don’t remember. You’re not *that* good a liar.”

Pure Vanilla groans; he falls backwards on the bed, throwing an arm over his face. “Can’t I get under the covers first?”

“Nope!” Shadow Milk rubs his hands together with glee, twirling his cane once before bopping Pure Vanilla right on the forehead. There’s a puff of blue smoke as the other lets out a startled noise; the haze swiftly clears and Shadow Milk peers down, surveying his work.

Blinking back at him are Pure Vanilla’s two mismatched eyes – now dropped to his chin. His mouth, now halfway up his forehead, parts in shock as his gaze darts to the left and right.

Shadow Milk grins ear to ear, snickering to himself as Pure Vanilla’s shoots up, the other’s hands grasping at his now-flipped face in confusion. Pure Vanilla pats down his cheeks, nearly poking himself in the eye as he pushes and prods, brow wrinkling in confusion.

Or, well, sort of his brow. It’s about where there’d be a nose, really.

“Well look at you!” Shadow Milk’s wicked smile does not abate as he pulls away, floating out of reach of Pure Vanilla’s fumbling hands. “I gotta say Nilly, I think it’s a *big* improvement.”

Pure Vanilla groans; Shadow Milk snickers again as the mouth on the other’s forehead droops into a frown.

“Well,” Pure Vanilla sighs, rubbing just below the eyes under his chin. “I suppose I’ll have to postpone my plans for tomorrow.” He flops back down on the bed then winces, massaging his cheek. “This is going to give me a headache, isn’t it?”

“One can only hope.” Shadow Milk floats directly over the bed, looking down as Pure Vanilla stares miserably back up at him. “But tell me, what are these oh-so important plans of yours that I have so delightfully disrupted? Scribbling away at your mountains of paperwork? Playing shepherd with your dung-covered flock again?”

“While both of those *are* important, no.” Pure Vanilla’s struggling with the sheets now, trying to grasp the edges as he misses by mere inches with his new, ruined depth perception. “I was planning to go to the markets.”

Shadow Milk gives him an unimpressed stare. “You, leaving the castle and me in peace for one day? Hey, don’t let me stop you.”

“I can’t go out like this.” Pure Vanilla’s finally tucking himself in, flopping down on his side as he burrows under the covers. “It’d defeat the point of going in the first place.”

“The point being?”

Pure Vanilla buries his face in the pillows. “To set the citizens’ minds at ease. Seeing me in this state would only unsettle them further.”

Shadow Milk scoffs. “Seeing you? My, what a high opinion the great king has of himself. And what, pray tell, has your slack-jawed masses so unsettled?”

There’s no response. Pure Vanilla’s eyes have already shut.

Shadow Milk hovers closer; he prods at Pure Vanilla’s cheek with his cane. “*Nil-ly*,” he singsongs. “It’s dangerous to ignore me, you know.”

Pure Vanilla cracks open one bleary eye, expression cross. “Shadow Milk,” he warns.

“Tell me.” Shadow Milk pokes him again and again, grinning a little wider each time. “Come on, tell me! Is it a deadly plague? Rumbblings of a civil war? Oh, *do* let me come to your beheading.”

“Shadow Milk,” Pure Vanilla snaps, batting away the cane. “Stop.”

Shadow Milk grins wickedly. “You’re *cranky*. I should keep you up late more often.”

Pure Vanilla sighs, rubbing at his face again. “I am not cranky. I am fatigued.”

“Ooh, *extra* cranky.”

A deeper, heavier sigh follows as Pure Vanilla pushes himself up on his side. “The citizens,” he says slowly, “are *unsettled* because the castle’s exterior has born banners of your face for the last five days.”

“Hardly a cause for alarm. It’s a very handsome face.”

“Three of those days,” Pure Vanilla continues tiredly, “your decorations were accompanied by some manner of giant serpent around the towers that lunged at any Cookie that came close.”

Shadow Milk gasps in mock hurt, clutching at his chest. “You didn’t like Bluebell? Oh, she’ll be *devastated*.”

Pure Vanilla's stare is delightfully unimpressed. "Word has also spread that you turned a jam delivery Cookie into a Cake Hound."

A smirk twitches at the corner of Shadow Milk's mouth. "He startled me. And I *did* turn him back."

"After I found him cowering in the cellar."

Shadow Milk shrugs. "He ran away. How was I to know where he went?"

Pure Vanilla flops back down into his pillows with a pinched expression. "May I go to sleep now?"

"Say please." Shadow Milk glances down, but Pure Vanilla's already closed his eyes again.

How boring.

Still, an idle thought is tickling at the back of Shadow Milk's mind. Pure Vanilla usually invites him to places, no matter how tedious they may be. Wandering the grounds, the pastures, even the berry fields had been put on offer, even if Shadow Milk continuously rejects them. Pure Vanilla may be charmingly irritable at the moment, but judging from his words his plans for the markets had been made some time prior – plans that did not have Shadow Milk in them. Considering how nauseatingly eager the other usually is at inviting him to every paltry affair, this purposeful exclusion could only mean one thing.

Pure Vanilla doesn't *want* him at the markets.

Shadow Milk taps his chin with his cane, a tiny grin pulling at his lips.

Interesting.

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The thing is that Shadow Milk can be, when he so chooses, a very patient Cookie.

It's not his favorite thing to tolerate. Centuries locked away behind bars had beaten resistance to the notion into his dough. The need for fresh air and wicked, impulsive flights of fancy consume him; he does not do well with sitting still and waiting for the right moment. He prefers to carve out his space in the world, setting a stage for his puppets to dance along regardless of time or place.

Still, he is not wholly incapable. Sometimes he just needs the right motivation.

It is this motivation that keeps him silent as the hours tick by, the night's soft embrace slipping away as morning's first glimmers of sun creep in through the windows. It is not until the first sunbeam finally reaches Pure Vanilla's face that the other stirs, a soft sigh

announcing his wakefulness. It is also, with no small amount of amusement, that Shadow Milk watches as the other drags his pillow over his head, burying his face back into the sheets with a groan.

Well. Only four hours of sleep will do that to a Cookie.

Still, there's only a few minutes of delay before Pure Vanilla finally rises, rolling out of bed with another tired sigh as he rubs at his eyes. He shuffles over to his mirrored dresser, reaching for the brush as he blinks sleepily at his own reflection.

Even more amusingly, it takes seven brush strokes before Shadow Milk finally sees Pure Vanilla's movements halt, realization openly dawning on the other's face. A hand lifts, poking and prodding as Pure Vanilla examines his features – normal, perfectly banal features, flipped right back into their proper place. Shadow Milk stifles a snort at the absurd amount of wonder in Pure Vanilla's expression as he smooths a hand over re-centered mouth.

Annoyingly, that same mouth curves into a smile; Pure Vanilla's gaze softens with despicably misplaced fondness.

What delusion. All the better, then. If Pure Vanilla thinks Shadow Milk had reversed the spell out of kindness, he has another thing coming.

Waiting around for Pure Vanilla to finish his morning routine is tedious; the other Cookie takes far too long to comb and style his ridiculously long hair, even longer to finish scribbling away at the paperwork he'd obviously neglected the night before. Shadow Milk has half-drifted off himself - until sudden movement jolts him awake.

Pure Vanilla is lifting his cloak from the chair – and with it, Shadow Milk's hiding spot.

It'd been a simple thing to mask his form as a shadow within the darkness lining the garment; the perfect hiding place, pressed right against the other's back. Shadow Milk slides along the starry patterns, nimbly avoiding any hint of light as the cloak is tossed over Pure Vanilla's shoulders. The fabric rustles as it's tied tight – then Pure Vanilla pauses, suddenly lifting his gaze as he scans the room.

Shadow Milk feels his Soul Jam pulse greedily at their proximity; based on his reaction, Pure Vanilla can feel it too.

Pure Vanilla keeps turning his head, as if his milky eyes are darting across every erstwhile shadow. Finally, he calls a cautious:

“Shadow Milk?”

Shadow Milk holds his breath; it's a pointless reaction, more instinct than reason. He can feel the other twist around, still peering about as he searches the room. The clock ticks painfully slow seconds by as Pure Vanilla shifts in place – before finally tightening his cloak and sighing to himself. “Still dreaming,” he murmurs; Shadow Milk can feel the cloak ripple as the other lifts a hand to rub at his eyes. “Or perhaps we've been apart too long again. What do you think, hm?”

A flicker of confusion ripples through Shadow Milk - was Pure Vanilla talking to him? Had he been caught out already?

Pure Vanilla's moving now, shuffling across the carpet as his cape flows behind him. Shadow Milk glides along the swaying fabric, curiosity piquing as the other suddenly stops. "Well?" Pure Vanilla suddenly prompts. "Nothing to say for yourself?"

Shadow Milk peers out at the edge of the cape; Pure Vanilla stands before his bookcase, hands reaching up for something just out of Shadow Milk's view. "I'll admit," Pure Vanilla continues, "You surprised me this morning. What made you change your mind?"

Who on Earthbread is this old fool talking to?

Pure Vanilla turns away again, stepping over to sit on the edge of what could only be his bed by the audible squeak. Shadow Milk swiftly maneuvers his way upwards, dipping just under the other's shoulders to finally, finally glimpse what Pure Vanilla has in hand.

Oh. Of *course*.

Shadow Milk glowers at the plush doll bearing his likeness; worse, Pure Vanilla's hand comes up to poke at its cheek with unsettling familiarity. "Why did you fix my face?" the other wonders aloud. "You've never rescinded a spell prematurely before. Was it something I said?"

Technically, yes – but not in a way Pure Vanilla will like.

A sigh follows; Pure Vanilla is standing again, making his way back to the bookcase. "An arrogant assumption on my part, perhaps." Another lift of his arms, no doubt replacing the doll on the shelves. "You're probably just plotting something worse, hm?"

Ooh, he *is* a quick study.

"I wonder if I can ever truly make you happy here."

Shadow Milk has to bite back the harsh, reflexive **no** that springs to the tip of his tongue.

"You're really quite stubborn, you know."

Rude.

"And loud."

Rude.

"But," Pure Vanilla muses, "I'm just as stubborn as you are. So I suppose that makes us two of a pair." A sudden laugh follows; Shadow Milk can feel the vibration through the other's back. "Two of a pair – a Joker and a King. Do you think you'd find that funny?"

That is decidedly *not* how two pair is played; yet still, Shadow Milk finds himself half-grimacing at the attempt.

Pure Vanilla's turning away again, crossing the room in the direction of his staff. "I should go and see you before I leave," he remarks. "I wouldn't want you to feel lonely while I'm gone."

Preposterous presumptions aside, Shadow Milk can feel his grimace drop into a frown as Pure Vanilla unlocks the door.

Oh. Pure Vanilla's going to go look for him?

Hm.

That... might take him a while.

Chapter 4

Pure Vanilla is persistent, Shadow Milk will give him that.

The other spends a tedious amount of time searching the castle, roaming from room to room as he calls Shadow Milk's name in vain. The kitchens, the armory, even the cellar isn't spared from Pure Vanilla's search. He even goes so far as to double back to Shadow Milk's room twice, knocking and waiting for a reply that's never forthcoming.

The prowling takes far too long; Shadow Milk even catches himself nodding off once or twice as he's carried along the shadows of the other's cloak. With as often as he's jostled about by the movement, he decides to slip up higher – and finds it's surprisingly comfortable within the upper recesses. The curve of Pure Vanilla's back is deceptively warm, a small hollow perfectly cloaked in darkness by a high collar. All things considered, it's a rather pleasant spot to nestle and wait the other's fruitless search out.

The pleased pulsing of his Soul Jam bears no weight in his choice of location. It's simply the most practical place to be.

The warmth and tedium of the search are a potent lull; Shadow Milk doesn't even notice he's dozing off until it's too late - not until sudden movement has him bolting awake, recoiling from the sharp, tugging sensation at his core. He flinches away, narrowly avoiding another pull on his form as he realizes something is yanking on his hiding place – *hard*.

Shadow Milk shrinks back as hands - tiny, grabbing hands - are grasping, pulling at the cloak as sun glints off the pattern. The edges are being lifted high, tugged upwards as a cacophony of chattering voices surround him on either side. Shadow Milk stares in disbelief as the face of a small child pokes up from under the cloak – their eyes immediately lock.

The child blinks; Shadow Milk blinks back.

Then the child's face lights up in a grin, followed by another harsh yank on the cloak. Shadow Milk turns immediately, fleeing higher to hastily meld into the safety of shadow around Pure Vanilla's neck.

“Wow! You have eyes in your cloak!”

“I do!” Pure Vanilla's voice is warm and gentle; pressed this close, Shadow Milk can feel the vibration of every word. “Do you like them?”

“Yeah!” The child's face, mercifully, disappears as they bow out from under the cloak. “They winked at me!”

“Did they now?” Shadow Milk hastily readjusts as Pure Vanilla bends, lowering himself to the child's height. “I'm quite fond of the pattern. Isn't it pretty?”

“So pretty!” A chirpy voice now comes from the right – another child. “You actually look cool now!”

“Barquillo Cookie,” another hisses. “That’s not nice!”

Pure Vanilla laughs; the vibrations feels like a rolling drumbeat and Shadow Milk decides he’s had enough. He slips back down, slithering down to the edges of the cloak to get a better look at these three pests –

Only to look out in surprise on a smiling crowd.

From what Shadow Milk can glimpse, they’re indeed in the markets – now that he’s shaken off the edges of sleep, he can hear the call of Cookies far and near shouting warmly to each other. The names of wares, prices, even snippets of furious arguing fill the air, a background of ever-shifting noise. There’s a glassware stall to his left, pristine pots and vases to his right – until both are swiftly blocked from view as the crowd presses closer.

“Pure Vanilla Cookie!” An elderly Cookie shuffles forward, raising her hand – based on the small noise Pure Vanilla makes, Shadow Milk guesses she’s pinched the other’s cheek. “My boy, it’s been ages! And look at you – how you’ve changed!”

“It is good to see you, Ghorabiye Cookie.” Pure Vanilla gently takes her hand, covering it in his own. “You look well.”

“I can’t say the same for you!” Another elder Cookie waves her cane in the air. “Skinny as a toothpick! What, you go off and leave us and forget to eat again? You’ll waste away!”

“Oh, he was always like that back in the village,” another sighs. “Always giving up his share for the young’uns.”

“You hear that! No wonder he’s so skinny. Why, you’ll blow away in a gust if you don’t take better care of yourself. You listen to your elders, now.”

Shadow Milk immediately clamps down on a snort of laughter.

His *elders*?

Pure Vanilla chuckles; he bends to gently kiss Ghorabiye Cookie’s hand before straightening and addressing the crowd. “Everyone, it is truly wonderful to see you all. I feel deeply honored by your care.”

“Oh, and just look at his hair!” An aproned Cookie sighs dreamily. “Oh, I remember when my husband had hair like that.”

“Hey!” A heavysset Cookie turns to her in affront. “I still have some!”

“Yes, dear. Of course, dear.”

There’s another tug to Pure Vanilla’s cloak; a new child stands to his right, looking up at him with the biggest dewy eyes Shadow Milk’s ever seen. “Pure Vanilla Cookie?” she asks shyly,

“Can I braid your hair?”

“Oh! Me too, me too!” The children swarm back around him, yanking and pulling excitedly on Pure Vanilla’s cloak as Shadow Milk hisses in displeasure.

Pure Vanilla bends again, gently placing his hand atop the smallest girl’s head. “Well, I’d like to walk the markets first,” he says, voice soft and kind. “But once I’m finished, I would be honored.”

The children burst into excited titters; Shadow Milk sighs in relief, their grubby little hands finally leaving the cloak in peace as Pure Vanilla stands. “Everyone,” he begins, “I-”

“Now, come along dear.” Ghorabiye Cookie’s shuffled forward, her hand grasping around Pure Vanilla’s wrist. “You’ll want to stop at my stall first. We’ll get you some of my famous rice pudding, fatten you up.”

“Nonsense!” a booming voice replies. “He needs some hot jelly stew in him! Come to my place instead!”

A clamor rises up from the crowd, voices arguing back and forth as they press closer. Pure Vanilla lets out a nervous laugh; Shadow Milk glimpses the other’s grip on his staff tighten. Then there’s another yank and Pure Vanilla is stumbling forward, swept along by the excited crowd – and taking Shadow Milk along with him.

How revoltingly... familiar.

Still, the situation is salvageable. Not ideal, certainly, but a pushy crowd is still a crowd. There’s plenty of eyes, more than enough attention heaped on Pure Vanilla – even if the sheer volume of it all is laughable.

Simple Cookies are always like this. Always excited to meet someone *special*, to heap praise and adoration upon their betters with bowed heads and glittering, greedy eyes. Always trying to grow closer, to slip up against their side and inevitably ask just one teensy, tiny **question-**

Shadow Milk sharply dismisses the thoughts from his mind. He has to focus. He’s been patient long enough; his opportunity is at hand, his puppets center stage.

Time to pull the strings.

The first shop they visit is a bakery, brimming with busy Cookies and the scent of cinnamon in the air. Pure Vanilla is all but forcibly sat at the center, instantly surrounded by plates upon plates of food being shoved under his nose. Waiters flit to and from the table like flies, presenting fanciful concoctions like would-be brides for Pure Vanilla’s sampling.

A ridiculous farce. Always seeking the *special* Cookie’s approval in the name of self-glory. Nothing’s changed.

Shadow Milk ignores the festivities, slipping through the cloak’s shadows to eye around the room. There’s a few options – cash registers, stove tops, even a particularly shiny trophy standing proud and tall atop a shelf. Then Shadow Milk’s gaze lands atop a young baker

Cookie, busy whisking a bowl while an egg timer ticks down beside him. In the oven beside him, Shadow Milk can see the first vestiges of a soufflé starting to build.

That'll do. No need to go big just yet. Start small and subtle – give the audience a taste of what's to come.

Shadow Milk concentrates on the timer; it's more difficult without his cane physically in hand, but he's more than capable of tugging a few gears. The timer ticks faster, then faster – before abruptly cutting through the din with a shrill shriek. The baker Cookie startles; he sets down his whisk, hurrying over to the oven and yanking his mitts on.

The head Cookie spots him, yelling out a warning; but it's too late. The other baker's already yanked down the oven door, pulling the soufflé out with one smooth motion - only to stare aghast as it collapses into itself.

“Fool!” The head Cookie is storming over to him; his booming wrath cuts through the din, instantly quieting the room. “That took an hour of work! Are you asleep in my kitchen?!”

“I-” the other Cookie stammers, shrinking in on himself. “The- I just- the timer-”

“The timer?! It'd scarcely been in there ten minutes! Use your head!”

The yelling escalates with each stammered reply; Shadow Milk grins wickedly as Pure Vanilla stands. There's some sort of polite excusal offered before the other slips from the room, finally exiting while the rest are distracted.

Pure Vanilla's hand comes up to touch his chest, and the sigh that leaves it is heavy.

Then there's a new hand clasping his arm, a toothy grin flashed, and Shadow Milk feels them being whisked away again back down the street.

Seems they're in for a long day.

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The rest of the afternoon passes much the same; Pure Vanilla is dragged from shop to shop by eager Cookies, gleaming eyes and grinning mouths asking his opinion on every little knick-knack thrust under this face. Gifts are showered upon him, clamoring voices overriding every polite refusal as Cookies greedily drink in every miniscule, often stammered drop of praise Pure Vanilla offers in return. The other's discomfort is tangible through their connection, so hastily overwhelmed by the attention being heaped upon him.

Clearly, Pure Vanilla had been away too long.

Still, as laughable as the Pure Vanilla's situation may be, it does provide ample opportunities – something Shadow Milk is happy to seize upon with a few clever tugs of his strings.

At the blacksmith, a freshly-forged sword shatters at the first swing. The tailor's finest robes rip apart at the seams; the ceramic stall's shelves snap, leaving a row of vases smashed upon the floor. Even the oh-so-composed jeweler looks three seconds away from weeping as he swears up and down that his prized piece had nary a scuff mere minutes before. Bakers burn their bread, carpenters hammer their thumbs and serving trays slip from waiters' hands.

With each little tug, tumble and crack Shadow Milk's grin widens; with each gasp, shout and groan of disappointment, the air in the markets grows steadily heavier. The Cookies still grab at Pure Vanilla, still plea for his attention at every moment – but as they're pulled from place to place, the cheerful shouts that once filled the air have quieted. In their place comes marvelously snippy quips, angry retorts – there'd even been the sound of a slap, though it'd been some ways away.

How quickly Cookies turned on one another; how familiar, how fun! The tiniest mishap and tempers flare white-hot in an instant. Blame is so terribly easy to throw around, to duck behind at the slightest inconvenience – and Pure Vanilla's presence just drives their emotions even higher.

Can't have the *special* Cookie think less of them.

Pure Vanilla's unease bleeds through like wine through silk; even without their Soul Jam's pulsing connection, Shadow Milk can practically taste the tension radiating off him. At each new shop he tries to help, attempting to soothe flaring tempers, offering to pay for damages that these oh-so clumsy Cookies that have been tripping into all day. Yet, delightfully, his attempts often make things worse, the shop owners' embarrassment only flaring higher as they refuse him and turn to the nearest employee to unleash their frustrations on instead.

By the time Pure Vanilla stumbles out of Latte Café – replacing the boba balls with marbles, Shadow Milk's rather proud of that one – the other's exhaustion is felt with the slump to his shoulders and heavy lean upon his staff. The sigh he lets out rattles in his chest; he runs a hand over his face.

“What a day,” he mutters to himself. “I should just go home.”

“Ah, that would be a shame. And here I thought we could finally borrow a moment of your time.”

An unfamiliarly posh voice has Shadow Milk twisting in the cloak; Pure Vanilla turns with him, uttering a small noise of surprise.

“Clotted Cream Cookie! I was not aware you had returned.”

A dazzling smile is followed by a low bow; as Clotted Cream Cookie straightens, the afternoon sun's rays gleam off his perfectly coiffed, golden hair. His suit is immaculate, perfectly pressed with nary a wrinkle in sight – even his neckerchief seems completely spotless.

Shadow Milk decides then and there that he does not like this Cookie.

“Pure Vanilla Cookie,” Clotted Cream says smoothly, perfect smile never leaving his face. “My apologies for not making you aware of my arrival sooner. I had traveled to the castle to announce myself, but I’m afraid the guards at your gate were...” He pauses, clearly for effect. “Pre-occupied? Some manner of serpent had their attention.”

“Ah, yes, well.” Pure Vanilla has the indecency to sound bashful. “The castle is a bit...”

“I must say,” Clotted Cream continues, as if he hadn’t heard a word. “It is a bit of a change, is it not?”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla replies uneasily. “Well-”

“Oh!” Clotted Cream claps his hands together. “Where are my manners? Pure Vanilla Cookie, may I introduce you to-”

“Vanilla Sugar Cookie.” A raspy voice cuts through the conversation; from behind the annoyingly dazzling Cookie, a small, hunched one shuffles forward. Her wrinkled face is pinched; she rests heavily on her breaded cane as she bows her head forward. “Your Majesty.”

“Ah.” Pure Vanilla dips his head in return; from this angle, Shadow Milk can glimpse the reluctant smile on the other’s lips. “Thank you, Vanilla Sugar Cookie. I am honored to meet you – even if I no longer bear the title of monarch in these lands.”

“Nonsense.” Vanilla Sugar sniffs audibly. “That’s what we called you when I was freshly baked, and it’s what I’ll call you now. You are still our founder, abdication or not.”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie,” Clotted Cream cuts in. “I was wondering if we three might have a word in private.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla straightens, his cloak rustling with the movement. “Has something happened?”

Vanilla Sugar snorts; she raps her cane on the ground, forcing attention back down to her. “I’ll say something’s happened,” she rasps curtly. “I could scarcely believe my eyes. Thought my granddaughter was making up tales.”

Shadow Milk feels a strong beat of unease surge through the connection. “About?”

Another loud sniff; Vanilla Sugar leans forward on her cane. “Our castle.” She shakes her head. “Our beautiful, glorious castle. Smashed to pieces in the Dark Flour War, rebuilt from the ground up and for what? To have some vile *Beast’s* face strewn about on it?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes; of course Cookies like *these* would care. Yet the unease rolling off Pure Vanilla only heightens; Shadow Milk watches the other tighten his grip on his staff, a false smile firmly in place. “My apologies, Vanilla Sugar Cookie,” he says gently. “I did not mean to alarm-”

“Alarm!” Another rap of her cane on the cobblestones. “Hah! It’s not just alarming, it’s a mockery! Cookies fought and perished in our great kingdom’s name, their crumbs scattered

in this soil – and this is how they’re repaid?”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie,” Clotted Cream interrupts smoothly. “The Crème Republic deeply honors your sovereignty in this land. We are simply... concerned, by recent developments. There have been questions raised, concerns that you may be...” Another lengthy, purposeful pause. “Well, I am certainly not one to call your strength into question. But if you require any *assistance*, any at all-”

“I understand.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is deceptively steady; Shadow Milk can feel some foreign, bitter current pulse through their connection. “Truly. But there is no action needed on the part of the Crème Republic at this time.”

Vanilla Sugar’s eyes narrow. “So,” she says harshly, “it’s true, then. You’re just letting that *thing* run amok! What if it comes down *here*, hm? If you’re going to keep a wild animal around, at least have the decency to cage it!”

Shadow Milk’s eyes flash as white-hot anger blurs his vision, the memories of familiar, glinting silver swimming before his eyes. He’s already grasping at the edges of his form, teeth bared as he tears at the veil of shadows-

Until a sudden, violent pulse of pain freezes him in place.

It hurts, scorching and stinging as it clenches at his chest. Yet somehow it feels foreign, harsh and acidic on his tongue. This is not his- no. This is not *only* his anger he’s feeling.

Pure Vanilla’s fury is flowing through their connection – and it is *scorching*.

The sensation is so shocking, so tight in how it clenches at his core that Shadow Milk almost misses the other’s next words.

“Vanilla Sugar Cookie.” There’s a certain awe to be had at how steadily Pure Vanilla holds his voice, how easily he lies through an air of calm that Shadow Milk can *feel* he does not truly possess. “While you are always welcome in these lands, I must ask that you mind your words more carefully when speaking of its inhabitants.”

The woman’s head recoils in affront. “*Inhabitants*?! I hardly think-”

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla interrupts calmly, “is my guest. He is not a wild animal, nor will I ever allow him to be caged like one. I regret that his actions have injured your memories of this place, but the castle remains my home and within my purview to host whomever and however I see fit.”

Vanilla Sugar’s eyes glitter angrily; her mouth opens to retort, cane already raising in defiance –

Before Clotted Cream steps between them.

“My apologies, Pure Vanilla Cookie.” Clotted Cream bows low, sweeping a hand in front of him. “I see in our hasty concern for your well-being, we have grievously overstepped. The

Crème Republic means no disrespect to you, nor the companions within your realm. Please, do forgive our transgressions this day.”

Pure Vanilla mimics the bow. “Of course,” he replies, equally smooth. “And I hope I have not offended in turn.”

“Of course.”

“If you’ll allow me,” Pure Vanilla continues, straightening up yet again, “I have something I need to attend to. If you’ll excuse me?”

There’s an angry snort from Vanilla Sugar, covered swiftly by an elegant litany of farewells from Clotted Cream – and then Pure Vanilla is striding off down the street in the opposite direction.

Strangely, he does not slow his pace as he continues forward; Cookies call to him, try to catch at the hem of his sleeve but Pure Vanilla politely dismisses them all. He is hurrying towards – something, but the what is unclear. More confusing still, he soon ducks off the main road entirely; his steps take him down twisting alleyways, turning corner after corner as the sounds of the markets begin to fade entirely. His steps don’t pause for a moment; leaving Shadow Milk thoroughly perplexed as he’s carried along for the ride.

It's not until all windows have disappeared, not until they're surrounded on all sides by plain weathered walls and near-total darkness that Pure Vanilla finally slows to a stop. As Shadow Milk peeks out, he sees they've come to a dead end; no sign of life, no new bend for the other to slip around. Pure Vanilla tilts his head, surveying his surroundings with an intensity Shadow Milk's rarely glimpsed before.

Are they being followed?

There's a beat of silence; Pure Vanilla lifts his staff, scanning the darkness one final time before setting it down with an audible *thud*.

“Get out.”

Shadow Milk blinks; he shifts to the edge of the cloak, trying to glimpse whoever Pure Vanilla's addressing –

Only to feel the cloak being lifted, held aloft in the air as Pure Vanilla's narrowed eyes lock with his own.

“I know you're there.” Pure Vanilla's tone is relentlessly sharp; his gaze, more so. “Out.”

Well. That's surprising.

Still, Shadow Milk isn't one to keep an audience waiting. He shakes off the shock, slipping out as his physical form coalesces in a whirl of shadows as he stretches his arms above his head.

“Oh, Nilly!” He floats upwards, dipping back into a mock swoon as he flutters his lashes. “So gallant! So fierce! Riding to my rescue against that foul, wrinkled old crone – oh I could just pinch your cheeks, I could.”

Pure Vanilla stares silently up, his unnervingly cold expression unchanging.

The grin on Shadow Milk’s face falters; the corners of his mouth twitch as he folds his arms behind his back, leaning forward and cocking a brow. “Uh, hello? Earthbread to Nilly. You can drop the whole scowling act now. Or are you just stuck like this n-”

“Why are you here?”

Shadow Milk tilts his head. “Excuse me?”

“Why,” Pure Vanilla repeats slowly, tonelessly, “are you here? Did you follow me from the castle?”

“Welllll...” Shadow Milk twirls his cane, leaning back as he pretends to think. “I wouldn’t say *followed*. More, tagged along for the ride?”

“You’ve been with me since the beginning.” Pure Vanilla’s words are still eerily cold, his gaze sharp and narrowed. “In my cloak. That’s what I felt in my room – what I’ve been feeling all day.”

“*Bin-go*,” Shadow Milk sing-songs, grinning ear to ear even as Pure Vanilla glares him down. “Oh, come on, Nilly. Aren’t you happy to see me? Though I must say, I’m so, so, *so* interested in how you figured me out! What gave it away, hm?”

“I’ve been feeling strange ever since this morning. I wasn’t certain at first, but Vanilla Sugar Cookie-” Pure Vanilla’s grip on his staff tightens briefly. “When she spoke against you, I suddenly felt...” Pure Vanilla frowns deeply, a hand coming up to touch at his Soul Jam brooch.

Ah. That fleeting tear in the veil of shadows Shadow Milk’s claws had wrought in blind, furious anger.

“Oops!” Shadow Milk leans back with a shrug, palms splayed upwards. “Well, what can I say? Caught with my fangs out!”

“You’ve been with me all day.” The words are pointed - a blatant accusation. “And you’ve been breaking the rules.”

Shadow Milk’s grin slowly fades; he feels his own eyes narrow to meet Pure Vanilla’s icy stare. “Excuse me?”

Pure Vanilla slams his staff into the ground; the force of impact is pathetic, really, but the clear anger radiating off him is palpable. “You think I haven’t noticed the chaos that followed me in the markets today? The shattered pots, the burning loaves, Cookies tripping over thin air left and right? For a Master of Deceit, you clearly weren’t trying to be subtle.”

“Well,” Shadow Milk replies airily, “I hardly *crumbled*—”

“My wishes were explicit.” Pure Vanilla’s cold anger pulses through their connection, clenching unpleasantly at Shadow Milk’s core. “I asked that you do not harm the Cookies of this kingdom, and that you keep them *out* of our games.”

Shadow Milk does not try to hide the ugly sneer twisting on his face. “Games?” He raps his cane in the palm of his hand twice; darkness floods their surroundings, extinguishing even the faintest glimpses of the sun overhead. “Oh, *Silly Nilly* - why didn’t you say so? I hadn’t realized we were **playing**.”

Pure Vanilla’s staff is the singular point of light amongst the darkness, glittering in defiance as he holds it aloft. “Shadow Milk,” he warns.

Shadow Milk slips from shadow to shadow, twisting through the space as Pure Vanilla’s darting gaze tries to follow his movements. “Over here,” he hisses, a breath in Pure Vanilla’s ear; the other swings around, but Shadow Milk has already slipped out of reach.

“Stop this!” Pure Vanilla holds his staff higher, light pulsing from the star within. “I have no wish to fight you!”

“Fight? Make up your mind, Nilly! Are we playing or not?”

“Shadow Milk!”

“I thought you *loved* games!” Shadow Milk lunges from the darkness; Pure Vanilla swings his staff again, narrowly grazing Shadow Milk’s cheek before he’s melting back into the shadows. “Oo, so close!”

“Shadow-!”

There’s an electricity in the air – a violent pulsing in the connection that dances along Shadow Milk’s dough. Anger, white-hot and heady, smoldering in his jam – more anger than just his own. He can feel Pure Vanilla’s unhappiness twisting into something raw, dancing closer to a shadow of Shadow Milk’s own viciousness. To see such fury, such disoriented anger spinning in the other’s soul-

Their connection shudders with the force of one furious beast clashing into the other, a flurry of teeth and claws. Resentment building, fury growing, each swipe fanning the other’s flames.

Feeding into each other.

“What’s the matter?” Shadow Milk’s voice bounces from all directions, a cacophony of disharmony as Pure Vanilla steps uneasily back. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

Pure Vanilla swallows, grip on his staff tightening. “Enough.”

“Isn’t this what your *games* are all about?” Shadow Milk slices his cane through the air, a jagged blade shooting up mere inches from where Pure Vanilla stood. “Keeping me *occupied*

in that ivory tower of yours?” Another slice and the blade surges forward, forcing Pure Vanilla to stumble backwards. “Keeping me *distracted* and *tame*?”

“Enough-”

“Keeping other Cookies out of it, and far, far away from **ME**!”

“I SAID, ENOUGH!!”

The burst of light of blinding; it rips through the darkness, searing against Shadow Milk’s dough as he throws his arms over his face. His spell is instantly shattered, splintered wisps of magic melting into thin air as his shadows are torn apart by the light radiating from Pure Vanilla’s staff. Sunlight streams in from above, dousing what little natural darkness remained – but its gentle warmth is nothing, nothing compared to the sudden, scorching heat radiating at his chest.

Shadow Milk’s Soul Jam is on **fire**.

He grasps blindly at it, doubling over in pain with a furious cry. Across from him Pure Vanilla slumps against his staff, clutching at his brooch with rattling gasps as his eyes clench shut.

At least this pain, too, is mutual.

They stay like this; Shadow Milk, curled around himself in the air and Pure Vanilla, barely remaining upright as they breathe, in and out, riding the waves of pain driving itself into every inch of their dough. What feels like hours pass as the sensation throbs on and on, the tightness only lessening in small, gradual slips – like a vice unclenching.

Pure Vanilla is the first to move. From the corner of his eye, Shadow Milk can see the other pull himself up on his staff, trembling from the exertion. There’s a deep, full-body shudder as his raspy breaths quicken momentarily – only slowing when he lifts his head to meet Shadow Milk’s own vacant gaze.

A moment passes like this; Shadow Milk’s mismatched eyes flicking over Pure Vanilla’s dull, milky own.

Then Pure Vanilla lowers his gaze, eyes slipping shut as he hoarsely rasps:

“Go home, Shadow Milk.”

A command. Weak, feeble, gasped with nary a wisp of strength behind it – but a command nonetheless.

Shadow Milk’s own gaze lifts up, past the curved roofs, past the darkening clouds littering the sky above. He stares up into the dismal, grey abyss, counting out the beats of pain still throbbing in time with each shaky breath.

A small smile tugs at the edge of his lips.

“Shadow Milk.” Pure Vanilla’s unsteady steps are coming closer. “Shadow Milk?”

“You know,” Shadow Milk breathes; his voice falters, a wince at the hoarseness of his own throat. “You are... an excellent... liar.”

Pure Vanilla’s footsteps falter.

“You really think...” Shadow Milk inhales again, clenching his teeth. “You’re treating me... with kindness.” Another shudder. “You think... I will ever... *ever*... stop **hating** you.”

Silence, broken only by Shadow Milk’s own rattling breath.

“You are a cage.” Shadow Milk closes his eyes. “And I will never be free of you.”

If there is any reply – a shout, a curse, a desperate plea – Shadow Milk does not hear it. He simply slips down, melding into the shadows between the cracks in the ground, sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness – the last thing he hears, his own stuttering breath.

Complete and utter nothingness envelops him.

It is bliss.

Chapter 5

The thing about nothingness is that it gets pretty old, pretty quick.

As peacefully numbing as it is to float about in darkness, Shadow Milk Cookie is not a creature of stillness. The quiet that surrounds him can only last so long until his hands twitch, until a sort of driving itch overtakes the stubborn need for a moment's peace. Perpetual restlessness as an aftertaste of his imprisonment, perhaps, but he'd never been one for idleness even back when his eyes blinked blue and gold.

By the time Shadow Milk finally drags himself from the darkness, evening is fast approaching – the sun has already dipped past the tips of the rooftops, casting long shadows across the alleyway. It is, mercifully, empty; a bit unsurprising with how much time seems to have passed between their clash and the now, but it is a mercy nonetheless.

Shadow Milk rubs at his face, a tired groan sighed through gritted teeth. The problem with the darkness is that it rarely fixes anything in full; while the worst of the burning sensation has passed, his temples still throb in irritation - to say nothing of the vice still tight around his lungs. Shadow Milk tugs irritably at his lower eyelids; it feels as if he's been trampled by a Biscuit Horse, who'd then kicked his chest in for good measure.

All this, and Pure Vanilla wasn't even *here*.

No doubt the glittery pest had returned to the castle; the rasped order for Shadow Milk to do the same still lingers in his mind. The memory alone makes Shadow Milk roll his eyes for an audience of none as he straightens up and dusts off his coattails.

Shadow Milk has no intention of returning – not now, perhaps ever, and certainly not when *ordered* to. Pure Vanilla can throw around all the little lightshows he wants; he does not command the Beast of Deceit, nor will he ever.

If Shadow Milk has to take a few blasts of light to the face, so be it. At least Pure Vanilla suffers too.

As Shadow Milk haphazardly backtracks his way down the alleys, the call of the markets grows ever closer. Shouts of brand-new wares, far-away delicacies and low, low prices all drift through the air; it's a soft, background din that's alluring in its simplicity.

Doubly so because Pure Vanilla had all but forbidden him from interfering with it.

When Shadow Milk can finally see the first glimpses of the main street from around the bend, he pauses and considers his options. While he definitely wants to play – is *itching* for it, really – there's a certain flair he conducts himself with among the masses. Grand spectacles are his style; Shadow Milk Cookie is a force of nature, a hurricane, an earthquake and tsunami all rolled into one.

Unfortunately, he's also feeling absolutely wretched at the moment.

The idea of blotting out the sun, bending reality around him, sending armies of deranged minions cascading through the streets to a symphony of shrieks is appealing – but it also sounds like a *lot* of work.

Shadow Milk sighs again, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. Even as exhausted as he feels, it's not like there's an understudy to step in. Shadow Milk Cookie has a reputation to maintain. A performer always perseveres, always takes the bow on a broken leg. Then again...

Who says Shadow Milk Cookie is the part he has to play?

There's a window tucked into the side of brick-layered building; the glass is coated in dust, but a few quick rubs with his sleeve turns it into a suitable mirror. Shadow Milk examines his reflection, turning this way and that as he massages his hand over his dough. Such a handsome face staring back - it seems a shame to hide it away, even for a moment.

Choices, choices.

Shadow Milk closes his eyes, concentrating as he feels the magic build within him. He reaches up, running his hands through his hair as he feels new, silken tresses cascade down his back. He taps his chest with his cane; his dapper suit ripples, the curves of a familiar dress puffing out in a burst of air before settling into place. His hands come up to run down his shoulders, a small cape materializing at his touch, tied tight with a ribbon at his neck.

He reopens his eyes, inspecting himself in the makeshift mirror as he tilts his head experimentally. It's one of his more successful forms, the shape of it pleasantly familiar in the way it settles into his dough. Many a trick can be played with a pretty face – and while it certainly holds no candle to his own, Lady Milk Crown Cookie has served him well over the years.

Still... it feels like something's missing.

Ah, yes. The bow.

By the time Shadow Milk steps out onto the market streets, his disguise is perfect. His cane, well hidden in the conjured basket on his arm, thumps steadily as he walks – ugh, actually *walks* down the cobbled paths.

He doesn't understand how other Cookies do this every day. Granted, kitten heels may not have been the best choice of footwear for his first time out – but Lady Milk Crown Cookie has her own reputation to maintain as well.

The other Cookies milling about in the streets pay him little heed, for the most part. There is more than one turned head, a few stop-and-starers, even an appreciative whistle from one admirer Shadow Milk's magic promptly trips to the ground. All rather standard, nothing too obtrusive from the norm. Shadow Milk may be in disguise, but that doesn't mean he's not a creature to be admired.

Vanity is just a word made up by ugly Cookies, anyway.

The first stall he stops at is a simple fruit stand; peaches, apples and pears fill wooden crates covered in patterned cloth. Shadow Milk passes a lazy gaze over the produce; the signs taped to their tables read *Picked Daily, 1 for 10 coins*, and *First Sample is Free!*

A small smile tugs at Shadow Milk's lips.

He glances over at the shopkeeper; the other Cookie is preoccupied, sweeping around the edges of the stall. When his back turns in full, Shadow Milk reaches for the third sign, passing his hand over the text before drawing back.

Shadow Milk then promptly plucks the shiniest apple from the pile and bites down on it with a satisfying crunch.

It takes a few moments; Shadow Milk's already taken several more bites before the shopkeeper finally notices, brief shock quickly replaced by hasty anger.

"Hey! Ma'am!"

Shadow Milk composes himself, expression cold and implacable as he turns towards the smaller Cookie hurrying towards him. "Ma'am!" the shopkeeper sputters, "You have to pay for that!"

A perfectly perked brow and an unimpressed once-over. "Excuse me?" Shadow Milk replies, icy disdain dripping from his tone.

That alone is enough to make the shopkeeper falter in his tracks; Shadow Milk has to tamp down the smile threatening to form on his face. "I," the other Cookie stammers, a flicker of uncertainty in his expression. "That's – I'm sorry ma'am, have you already paid?"

Hah! Apologies this quickly! Other Cookies are just *too* easy.

Shadow Milk's perfect mask doesn't slip once, a condescending tilt to his head as he eyes the other Cookie over. "Your sign," he replies slowly, "says otherwise." He motions with a single flick of his wrist at the third sign on the table, a sign that now reads:

*First **Apple** is Free!*

The shopkeeper stares openly; he sputters, wringing his hands as he glances uneasily between the writing and Shadow Milk's unimpressed gaze. "I- I'm afraid that's a mistake. I'm not sure- I painted those signs just this morning, I know I didn't-"

Shadow Milk steps closer, the harsh click of his heels on stone making the other Cookie shrink back - so funny! So pathetic! "Are you **accusing** me of something?"

"No!" The shopkeeper waves his hands in front of his face. "No, ma'am! I merely-"

"Lady."

The shopkeeper blinks unsteadily. "I-"

“*Lady Milk Crown Cookie*.” Shadow Milk leans closer, narrowing his gaze. “Falsifying advertisements, drawing customers in only to accuse them? I expected better of the *Vanilla Kingdom*. I wonder what my host, *Pure Vanilla Cookie* would say about this?”

A tiny droplet of truth always makes for the most delicious lie.

The shopkeep’s dough goes white. “No!” he sputters. “No, my lady! Please – take as many apples as you like! No charge!”

Shadow Milk bites his lower lip, eyes crinkling in mirth before quickly composing himself. “Hm! How generous. As many as I like?”

“Please!” The shopkeep is practically shoving apples into Shadow Milk’s basket, the fruit spilling haphazardly from his hands. “As a token of my sincerity!”

It is only centuries of practice that keeps Shadow Milk calm and collected as he eyes the other Cookie up and down. “Very well. I suppose the only thing to inform *Pure Vanilla Cookie* of is the generosity of his citizens.”

The shopkeep’s head practically scrapes the floor as he bows; Shadow Milk turns away, placing an apple at his mouth to hide the wicked grin creeping up his face.

Oh, these Cookies are *fun*.

Across from the produce stand is a stall containing some sort of gallery exhibit; rows and rows of paintings stare blankly back as Shadow Milk meanders through the wares. The owner is on him in instant, eagerly extolling each portrait Shadow Milk so much as glances at with vibrant descriptions of so-and-so and this-and-that – honestly, Shadow Milk stopped paying attention to her past the first three words. He pretends to examine one portrait for an especially long time, waiting the owner’s patience out until another customer enters the shop, distracting her long enough for Shadow Milk to slip away – though not without leaving behind a few *additions* of his own, of course.

Judging by the startled shriek that carries through the air a few moments later, he’s been discovered – but Shadow Milk is already long gone by the time the owner furiously stumbles out into the streets, melting into the crowd as naturally as a shadow.

Honestly, art really is *so* subjective. Personally, Shadow Milk thinks Moonlight Cookie looks *much* better with a mustache.

It is only the air of placidity and decorum that a form like Lady Milk Crown Cookie demands that keeps Shadow Milk from all but skipping down the streets. There’s tingling, wicked delight coursing through his jam; it is electric, all-consuming. His Soul Jam sings, the first note of pleasure since Pure Vanilla had thrown his little tantrum.

He’d *missed* this.

The lies flow easily, as fluidly as water as Shadow Milk slips from stall to stall. He points out a typo in an ancient manuscript; he shakes his head in disappointment at the *obvious* mark of

forgery on a priceless vase. He bats his eyes in front of the blacksmith's wife, asks why the tomatoes are all suddenly blue, and refuses to leave unless the shopkeep shows him where the vegan eggs are kept.

Shadow Milk's enjoying himself so much that he doesn't even think to check if he's being followed.

It starts with a new voice, someone calling out to him – but Shadow Milk pays it no mind, so absorbed in laying out the machinations of his next trick. He doesn't hear the approaching swish of petticoats, or the firm clicking of heels on stone drawing closer to him. It's only when a hand is placed on his shoulder that that another Cookie's proximity finally registers – and it is only, once again, Lady Milk Crown Cookie's impeccable poise that prevents Shadow Milk from instinctively crumbling the hand laid upon him.

When Shadow Milk turns, three Cookies are smiling back at him. They appear to be around his – well, projected age. They're all young women, all dressed in finery with glittering ornaments done up in their hair. There's two at the back bear matching pink and cream bouffants – twins, perhaps? – but it is the Cookie standing front and center that immediately captures his attention. She sports a deep, wine-red ballgown, a feathery fan, and a sly smile that does not meet her eyes in the slightest.

"My!" she remarks and oh, that voice is *chirpy*. "I haven't seen you around the markets before."

Shadow Milk says nothing. The way they're looking at him is strange; it lacks the unabashed admiration most onlookers heap upon this form. Instead, these Cookies eye him up and down almost appraisingly, a flicker of amusement deepening the curves of their smiles.

"You're so pretty." The pink one flutters her lashes. "Don't you think so, Friand Cookie?"

"*So* pretty," the yellow one echoes. "What do you think, Juniper Berry Cookie?"

The comment seems to be directed at the Cookie in the middle; she ignores it, still raking her eyes over Shadow Milk with a deepening air of amusement. "Tell me," she remarks, gaze still locked on Shadow Milk's own, "are you a member of House Blueberry? I wasn't aware they had any... *distant relations* hidden away around here."

The two minions at her left and right fail to hide their wicked grins behind their fans, and Shadow Milk mutedly realizes that he's being insulted. Insulted in a strange, round-about way, seemingly due to some petty nobility drama they've mistakenly taken him to play a part in – but insulted nonetheless.

Well, alright. If they're playing games, he's dabbled in this sort enough to know the beats.

Shadow Milk reaches into his basket of apples, producing an inky-blue fan that he snaps open in front of his face – mimicking their movements, to their visible displeasure. "I am not," he replies coolly, summoning every ounce of Lady Milk Crown Cookie's natural disaffection. "And who are you to ask?"

A subtle narrowing of three pairs of eyes; perhaps they hadn't expected him to bite back.

The pink one is the first to speak. "I am Lady Pamplermousse Cookie."

A mocking tilt of the head from the yellow. "Lady Friand Cookie."

Their leader draws herself up to her full height, fanning herself once before smoothly announcing: "I am Lady Juniper Berry Cookie, of the Boysenberry line."

Shadow Milk lets his gaze wander, idly watching a bird soar by overhead. "Haven't heard of you. I don't spend much time amongst lower nobility."

The desired effect is instant; displeased glares narrow to slits, even as those pointy little smiles never slip from their faces. "Oh?" Juniper Berry queries in falsetto, stepping forward as her two minions fan out on either side. "How strange! You simply *must* tell us your name, then."

Shadow Milk drops his lazy gaze back down to her; Friand and Pamplermousse stand almost at his sides now. A beat passes, making them wait as he visibly considers their command. "I," he says after a moment, "am Lady Milk Crown Cookie."

Juniper Berry's lips curve with a wicked smile. "Haven't heard of you."

"I'd imagine not." Shadow Milk fans himself, his nonchalant expression not wavering once. "As I said, I don't spend much time amongst *lower* nobility."

Friand and Pamplermousse glance between each other as Juniper Berry's poisonous smile twitches. "Then where," she continues, "pray tell, do you spend your time, *Lady* Milk Crown Cookie? Amongst the *Huckleberry* clan, perhaps?" There's a nasty set of giggles that ripples through the trio, eyes glittering with mirth.

Seriously, Shadow Milk has *no* idea who these people are. He does, however, know one name he can always drop to great effect.

"Recently?" he replies, lazily flicking his fan to the side. "I've been holidaying with Pure Vanilla Cookie. In the castle." A simpering smile, a streak of Shadow Milk himself slipping through as he adds: "Perhaps you've heard of *him*?"

Their reactions are instantaneous; Friand and Pamplermousse's eyes go wide, gazes darting between each other before nervously flicking over to Juniper Berry. The other Cookie, to her credit, has not changed her expression one bit –

Aside from the sudden, cracking death grip on her fan.

"In the castle," she repeats coolly, all trace of deceptive warmth vanished. "Really."

Shadow Milk perks his immaculately plucked brow; he says nothing as the three women stare back at him in angry silence.

“I’ve heard that,” is whispered at his back, Friend Cookie bending closer to her twin. “That he’s hosting someone up there?”

“The castle’s been closed for ages,” is hissed back. “But, weren’t people saying-?”

“Oh, that’s *right*,” Juniper Berry seems to have recomposed herself, straightening up as she takes another step closer. “Lady Milk Crown Cookie, you must forgive our surprise! We had no idea *you* were staying up there too.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow slightly; he doesn’t like the sound of that ‘too’.

“You see,” Juniper Berry continues, snapping her fan open as she leans closer. “There’s been *terrible* rumors about. Have you heard them?”

A tense moment passes; Shadow Milk keeps her gaze, refusing to back down even as begrudging knowing seeps through him. “I haven’t,” he replies coldly, “Do tell.”

Juniper Berry’s smile widens ever so slightly. “About the *monster*.”

Of course.

“A monster?” Shadow Milk is nothing if not a performer; he does not waver, does not so much as flinch at the word. “How frightening.”

“They say Pure Vanilla Cookie’s been keeping it in the castle. But, isn’t that where you’re staying?” Juniper Berry taps her fan to her chin, mock consideration on her face. “How could *you* not know about it? Haven’t *you* been staying there?”

Ah. A flicker of amusement tugs at Shadow Milk’s lips. They don’t think he’s the monster.

They think he’s a liar.

Juniper Berry reaches into his basket, grasping an apple and holding it aloft between them. “Poor thing,” she coos, eyes softening in mock pity. “There’s no shame in being a humble merchant girl. You don’t have to go around telling nasty little *lies* to feel better.” She then straightens, turning the apple over in her palm. “How about I buy an apple, hm? Will that make you feel better?”

Shadow Milk Cookie eyes the apple passively; his free hand comes to rest gently on his cane, still hidden within the basket. “I wouldn’t sell that one.”

“Hm?” Juniper Berry smiles. “And why’s that?”

“It’s got a worm in it.”

Juniper Berry scoffs, her gaze flicking back over to the apple in hand-

To find a black, writhing serpent baring its fangs in her palm.

Their screams shatter the marketplace; Juniper Berry flails wildly, stumbling backwards as her minions scatter with their own flurry of squeals. Other Cookies turn towards the sound, rushing in to assist - it is pandemonium, a wonderful cacophony of shrieks and shouts as the crowd tries to catch the serpent slithering about their stampeding feet.

The commotion provides ample opportunity for Shadow Milk to slip away; he ducks through the crowd, weaving past the growing murmurs of concerned Cookies. As he walks, he finds himself unconsciously holding the fan in front of his face, using it to cover the wicked grin twisting on his lips.

A surprisingly useful little trinket. He'll have to incorporate it into more of his disguises in the future.

Shadow Milk's steps take him deeper into the markets; the farther he goes, the fewer Cookies seem out and about. There's still a handful of stalls, still groups milling about and haggling, but it seems he's beginning to reach the tail end of the markets.

The streets eventually open up into a larger plaza; in its center is a glazed, marbled fountain and - more importantly - two empty benches on either side. Shadow Milk immediately makes a beeline for the closest one, sweeping his skirts out as he drops down with a muted groan of relief. In all the excitement of the markets, he'd been neglecting to notice just how much his feet *hurt*.

He truly does not understand how other Cookies do this all day.

The bench, while stiff and worn, is still the reprieve he needs. The plaza surrounding him is busy, but not overly noisy; the rays of the evening sun, still tiptoeing towards the horizon, warm his dough pleasantly. Shadow Milk folds his hands and settles in, leaning back on the bench as he closes his eyes and exhales a long, slow breath. He listens to the sound of the fountain water bubbling, a windchime tinkling, the calls of a bird overhead. It's incredibly peaceful; and in this singular moment, Shadow Milk finds he doesn't mind that.

He wonders what Pure Vanilla Cookie is doing.

Shadow Milk's brow instantly pinches with irritation as he sharply dismisses the thought because *no*, he doesn't *wonder*. He doesn't *care*. That sparkly little pest is insignificant, a smear at the bottom of his heels. Shadow Milk is free to do what he pleases, when he pleases, regardless of whatever the great *Pure Vanilla Cookie* thinks of him.

Why hadn't he waited for Shadow Milk back in the alley?

Perhaps good sense had finally filtered through that stubborn head of his. Shadow Milk hadn't wanted to see him, still doesn't want to see him. The farther away Pure Vanilla Cookie is, the better. Let that old fool rot away in his castle; Shadow Milk is having plenty of fun right down here.

Had he really just gone and returned to the castle, though? Pure Vanilla has never given up on him during their arguments before.

Maybe he's finally taken the hint. Maybe Pure Vanilla finally, *finally* understands the depths of Shadow Milk's hatred for him.

Maybe Pure Vanilla hates him back now. Maybe he never wants to speak to Shadow Milk again.

Maybe he really is back at the castle.

...

He wonders what Pure Vanilla Cookie is doing.

Shadow Milk abruptly sits up, scrubbing at his face with a scowl hidden by the palms of his hands. Even in a moment of rest the other Cookie plagues him, his memory a buzzing little gnat in Shadow Milk's ear. No matter. No matter! Shadow Milk doesn't need rest; there's plenty in the markets to keep him preoccupied.

A petulant glance around the plaza doesn't reveal much; there's a shopkeep selling Jelly Burgers, another adjusting the signs outside his craftworks stall. Even the few customer Cookies milling about seem lost in their own conversations, bags bulging with their wares as they move from stall to stall. Nothing terribly interesting...

"And I'm telling you, it's too much!"

Except that.

Shadow Milk peers over to his left, squinting his eyes. The voice had come from a tall, brawny-looking Cookie who's shaking his head in clear irritation; he seems to be addressing the smaller Cookie before him. Shadow Milk tilts his head, glimpsing hair done up in braids and a rather worn-out frock – her expression is pained, and a basket of blue flowers is clutched tight to her chest.

"Look, Carnation Cookie," the man sighs. "My wife's birthday is almost over; you're really putting me in a bind here!"

"I-I'm sorry, Khapse Cookie," the girl stammers back. "The price is only-"

"Outrageous! I'm buying flowers, can't you be more reasonable?"

"But..." the girl fidgets nervously. "The blue primroses are rare... I had to go far into the mountains just to-"

"Look." The man rolls his eyes. "They're flowers, right? They're going to die in a few days anyway. Why let them go to waste?"

"Well... Um..."

Shadow Milk's eyes narrow; before he realizes, he's pushing himself off the bench, fan flicked open as he advances on the pair. "Excuse me." His voice is crisp, commanding; both heads turn towards him, one annoyed and one visibly grateful.

“Oh!” The girl, Carnation Cookie, straightens immediately. “Um, did you-?”

Shadow Milk stops before her, taking the time to pointedly look over her basket. The flowers within are indeed beautiful, lovely shades of blue decorating the petals – though the vibrant, yellow stems he could do without. Shadow Milk plucks a flower from the basket, turning it from side to side before asking: “How much for a bouquet?”

“Oh! Um...” Visible hesitation. “Well, I was... thinking 20 coins, but-”

“Outrageous,” the man repeats, shooting Shadow Milk a huffy look. “You see what I mean?”

Shadow Milk slowly slides his gaze over; he waits a moment, watches the man – Khapse Cookie, that’s what she’d called him - grow slightly uneasy under the weight of his stare. Finally, Shadow Milk remarks: “Do you take me for a fool?”

Khapse Cookie blinks, recoiling slightly before a flash of anger furrows his brow. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, please!” Shadow Milk’s raising his voice, snapping his fan to the side audibly. “You think you’re the only Cookie with this idea? Half the kingdom is looking for these!”

His commotion is working; he can feel curious gazes drawing his way, passing Cookies slowing in their stroll as they turn their attention towards him.

Khapse Cookie scowls. “Half the kingdom?! They’re flowers!”

“Oh please!” Shadow Milk repeats, even louder and with a shake of his head. “Everybody knows Pure Vanilla Cookie is in the markets today!”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie?” come the whispers; Cookies draw closer, heads turning in unison. “Did she say Pure Vanilla Cookie is here?”

Khapse Cookie gapes at him. “Wh- what does he have to do with-?”

“Everybody knows these-” Shadow Milk snaps his fan at the girl’s basket, “-are Pure Vanilla Cookie’s favorite! What, you think you’re going to take them **all** for yourself and win his favor?”

“Favor? Pure Vanilla Cookie’s favor?” The mutterings are growing louder, more and more Cookies slinking closer.

Carnation Cookie looks between the two of them in confusion. “Oh, um,” she stammers. “But, I thought Pure Vanilla Cookie’s favorite was white lil-”

Shadow Milk drops his gaze to her, his eyes flashing dangerously; she immediately clams up.

“Hey.” A slim Cookie is shouldering past them, nodding to the basket. “How much?”

“Hold on!” Khapse Cookie sputters. “I was here first! These prices are still-”

“I’d like some.” Another Cookie is at Shadow Milk’s side, reaching into her purse. “Is fifty coins alright?”

Carnation Cookie’s eyes go wide. “Fifty? I- yes, of course!”

“Fifty?!” Khapse Cookie looks positively apoplectic. “Fifty- but my wife will-!”

“Move.” Yet another Cookie tries to shove by. “If you’re not buying, get out of the way.”

More and more Cookies pile in, crowding around as they shove their way to front with increasing desperation – Shadow Milk can barely see Carnation Cookie under the eager clamoring. Khapse Cookie, meanwhile, has been shunted to the side; he balls his fists in anger, shooting Shadow Milk Cookie a poisonous glare before promptly stomping off in a slew of furious muttering.

Shadow Milk flutters his fan, smiling to himself as he watches the man go.

Still, it’s getting a bit loud now; there’s the beginnings of a frenzy building, the plaza beginning to crowd with curious Cookies all flocking to see the source of the commotion. Shadow Milk gathers his things from the bench, glancing around before spotting a darkened alleyway off to his right – the perfect place to slip away.

Surprisingly, it’s not as dirty as the others; the long shadows of the buildings on either side mask him in a pleasant darkness as Shadow Milk meanders down another series of winding paths. Judging by the lack of noise, he’s drifting farther from the main road the deeper he goes in – but still, one of the corridors must lead back eventually.

Perhaps it’s his good mood, perhaps it’s the loud crunch of the apple between his teeth – perhaps he’s become just a bit too relaxed for his own good. Shadow Milk’s barely paying attention to his route, eyes half-closed as he takes another bite of his apple and rounds the bend-

To feel the pointed tip of a blade at his throat.

“Don’t move.”

Chapter 6

Shadow Milk is not a Cookie that is easily threatened.

To be unarmed in a dark alley with a knife to one's throat is enough to send any common Cookie's heart racing; Shadow Milk merely stills in momentary surprise. His attention lapses at times – so little can possibly hold even a sliver of hope of harming him – yet this development is still... unexpected.

Common banditry in the Vanillian streets? How far Pure Vanilla's kingdom has fallen.

The point of the blade is sharp enough to press to his throat, but it does not cut, merely pressing dangerous close with a small twitch in the hand of the one holding it. The sensation stings ever so slightly, like the scrape of unsanded wood on his dough.

Wait, wood?

“Biscocho Cookie!” A voice hisses from behind. “What are you doing?!”

“What do you mean, what am I doing?” The blade presses closer; still, it does not cut. “She's an intruder!”

“She's a girl!”

“So?! She's an intruder girl!”

Shadow Milk blinks slowly; the voices argue back and forth, something remarkably... distinct about the pitch in their voices. His gaze drifts lazily down to the knife to his throat, looking the bandit's weapon over. The hand holding it is small –

Incredibly small. Absurdly small.

The blade's made of wood.

This is a toy.

Shadow Milk lifts his own hand, slowly pushing the blade away from his throat – his *captors* are so busy arguing that they don't even seem to notice, letting Shadow Milk step away and turn in full to view them.

Yep. These are children.

The one with the knife – a pitiful excuse for a weapon, stuck together from strips of rotting wood – is a tiny little thing, perched atop a set of crates and waving his free hand in the air as he rants. The other boy – taller, slimmer, looks to have a few years on the other – has his hands on his hips, a well of clear exasperation in his eyes as he shakes his head.

“We can’t have intruders wandering around!” Biscocho Cookie stabs his blade in the air, scowling. “She’s gonna mess everything up!”

“Dude,” the other sighs. “Look at her! She’s a girl, you can’t be mean to her!”

Okay, wow.

“What!” Biscocho Cookie gawps. “No way! Daisy Cookie is mean to *me* all the time!”

“Yeah, well!”

“Well, what?! That’s not fair!”

“I didn’t say it was fair!” The taller Cookie throws up his hands in frustration. “Those are the rules! Didn’t Mom ever tell you?”

“No.” Biscocho Cookie folds his arms stubbornly across his chest. “She only tells me stories about knights and dragons.”

“And what do the knights *save* from the dragons?” the other asks with a roll of his eyes.

Biscocho Cookie blinks. “Princesses.” He then turns, shooting a suspicious look Shadow Milk’s way. “Are *you* a princess?”

Shadow Milk, who has been vacantly watching the proceedings with a thin air of amusement, returns the suspicious stare with an unimpressed one of his own. This all seems quite beneath Lady Milk Crown Cookie; but he himself is willing to play along for a bit. Shadow Milk pulls out his fan, fluttering it front of his face as he gives the boys a slow once-over. “Do I *look* like a princess?”

The pair of them, humorously, seem to give it some actual thought. Biscocho Cookie’s eyes squint, brow furrowing as he leans in to peer; the other’s look is more thoughtful, more appraising as he glances between Shadow Milk’s dress and hair.

“Hmmm.” Biscocho Cookie rubs a tiny hand under his chin. “Yeah, kinda.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Then isn’t that your answer?”

“Dude!” The other Cookie hisses; he kicks at the crates, rattling them with the impact. “You threatened a princess!”

“Cut it out, Rosquillo Cookie!” Biscocho Cookie flails his arms, quickly re-balancing. “I didn’t know! Besides, she’s not supposed to be here!”

“She’s just lost.” The other – Rosquillo Cookie – nods his statement with an air of absolute confidence. “You’re lost, right? Ma’am? Um, Lady?”

“You’re supposed to say *your Highness*,” Biscocho Cookie pipes in.

“Shut up!”

“*You* shut up!”

Biscocho Cookie leaps off the crates; the two tangle and tussle together, pulling and shoving as Shadow Milk – well, he just watches. This mess doesn’t need his hands in it to escalate. It’s certainly amusing enough, a small smile of incredulity on his lips; yet it’s still just a Punch-and-Judy show. Best to move on before he gets entangled in more of their... this.

Shadow Milk turns, already moving to slip past them and continue on his way, when Rosquillo Cookie calls out: “Wait, wait! Not that way!”

“Hm?” Shadow Milk glances back, perking a brow. “And why not?”

Rosquillo Cookie has divested himself of his brother, tossing the smaller Cookie off as he scrambles to stand. “It’s a dead end.” He glances backwards towards his sibling. “See? Lost.”

Biscocho Cookie lies flat on the pavement, scowling at the sky. “So? Let her be lost.”

“No way. We have to escort her. That’s what Dad says you do with lost ladies.”

“What?” Biscocho Cookie snaps his head up. “Not fair! What about the heist?!”

Heist?

“We’ll do it after,” Rosquillo Cookie snaps back.

“No,” Biscocho Cookie retorts firmly, folding his arms across his chest. “We promised Boss we’d get it done *now*.”

Boss? Both of Shadow Milk’s brows lift; consider his interest thoroughly piqued.

“Miss Highness,” Rosquillo Cookie begins, turning back to Shadow Milk with a little bow. “We would be honored to escort you-” A pause. “Um, where do you need escorting?”

“Stupid.” Biscocho Cookie is getting to his feet, dusting off his shirt. “Princesses live in castles, remember?”

“Oh, right!” Rosquillo Cookie brightens visibly. “Should we take her back to the castle?”

No. No, they will *not* be doing that.

“Actually,” Shadow Milk drawls, cutting off the boy with a flick of his fan. “I’m right where I need to be. I’m here to see your boss.”

The declaration draws a surprised look from both boys; they glance between each other before Rosquillo Cookie asks: “Really?”

Shadow Milk tilts his head, *tsking* audibly. “Are you calling a princess a liar?”

“No!” the boy corrects hastily. “No, it’s just-”

“We have business together,” Shadow Milk interrupts. “That’s all. So,” he continues smoothly, “will you *brave knights* be escorting me, or shall I wander about these grimy alleyways myself?”

The pair look at each other again, visibly weighing the choice. Rosquillo Cookie gives Biscocho a look; the other finally sighs, unfolding his arms. “Fine!” he snaps. “But we’re doing the heist on the way.”

Shadow Milk smiles to himself, sweeping out his skirts as he dips into a little mock bow of his own. “Well, then. Shall we?”

If nothing comes of the pair, they’re an amusing diversion at best. But, on the off-chance, if there truly is some sinister underworld boss, hiding in the shadows of Pure Vanilla’s own streets—

Well. That’d be something, wouldn’t it?

--

The path the two take him on is... interesting, to say the least.

They stick to the alleyways, never once brushing close to the main road; Rosquillo Cookie takes the lead, beckoning them down cramped corridors and hoisting his brother over ledges. There had, temporarily, been a moment of consideration as they’d tried to figure out how to get Shadow Milk over a particularly tall fence; it’d devolved into yet another back and forth, yet again, of what princesses do and don’t do. Their proclaimed inability to climb was new to Shadow Milk but hey, he’d never seen one do it himself.

While the boys had bickered, Shadow Milk had simply folded his arms behind his back, stepping up into this air; it’s not until he’d floated well past the top of the fence that the two had noticed, mouths agape as Shadow Milk’d landed gracefully on the other side.

As they’d stared in awe, Shadow Milk had hidden his smile beneath his fan and offered a simple:

“*Magic* princess.”

This trick, unfortunately, turned out to be a little more trouble than it’s worth. Biscocho Cookie had gone from suspicious to besotted in an instant, now practically hanging off Shadow Milk’s skirts as he babbles question after question.

“Can you fly for real? Have you met a dragon? Can you defeat a dragon? Can you make *me* fly? How many dragons?”

The chattering is non-stop; Shadow Milk ignores him for the most part, giving terse non-answers as he tries to shoo the pest out from under his feet. Honestly, he’d forgotten just how

relentless children could be; Candy Apple Cookie had at least had the good sense to recognize his signs of irritation, even in her earliest years.

Mercifully, their frequent stops are a good source of distraction – temporarily, at least.

Despite the lofty claims of a heist, there's yet to be anything remotely resembling one; instead, Rosquillo is openly knocking on Cookie's doors, waiting patiently on porch steps with his satchel in hand. Biscocho Cookie and Shadow Milk hang far back – he has been stubbornly told by the other he is not to interfere – yet whenever a Cookie opens their door, all that occurs is a brief conversation before Rosquillo is handed a bag or parcel and the door shuts once again.

Bizarre. A pick-up scam? Some sort of backwoods dealing?

It's not until the boy returns from their third stop, a large package in hand, that Shadow Milk finally questions: "What are you *doing*?"

Rosquillo gives him an equally incredulous look. "Getting supplies?"

"Supplies," Shadow Milk repeats. "For...?"

"The heist?"

"Yeah, the heist!" Biscocho already is back to clinging to Shadow Milk's leg, hands balled in the other's skirts. "Can we go, can we go?"

"Yeah." Rosquillo Cookie is tucking the package into his satchel, shouldering the bag as he looks between the pair. "We're gonna have to go slow from here, though. Black Raisin Cookie's crows are everywhere."

Ah, now *this* is a name Shadow Milk knows. A renewed flicker of interest beats in his chest; if Black Raisin Cookie is who they're avoiding, then this dismal arrangement holds some promise yet.

They don't have to go far; Rosquillo leads them down two more roads before throwing a hand out, stopping the pair in their tracks. He nods silently upwards; overhead, Shadow Milk glimpses a few stray tail feathers peeking out over the roof.

Ah. The crows.

The three of them wait; the bird ruffles itself, hopping back and forth for a bit. Shadow Milk can feel his patience waning as the seconds tick by, hand already sliding into his basket towards his cane-

A sharp, two-toned whistle pierces the air.

The bird squawks, taking off in a fluttering of wings; ahead, Shadow Milk can begin to make out the sounds of footsteps approaching, the clack of heels on stone.

"There you are."

Ah. Shadow Milk knows this voice well, has heard it a million times through Pure Vanilla's eyes. Gruff and hardened by a life under siege, eyes so sharp Shadow Milk can remember them piercing through the darkness even now.

Black Raisin Cookie.

"Come on." A softer flapping of wings, the sound of a caw that she meets with a chuckle. "None of that. We're going to be late." Her footsteps resume – and they're coming closer.

Rosquillo Cookie holds a hand over his mouth, as if trying to smother the sounds of his own breathing. Biscocho Cookie clings closer, grasp tightening around Shadow Milk's leg, burying his face in the other's skirts-

Ugh. His hands feel sticky.

Yet all their bracing is for nothing; Black Raisin Cookie simply passes their hiding spot by, her boots echoing on the cobblestones until slowly fading out of earshot. Rosquillo Cookie still keeps his arm out, eyes narrowed in concentration as he waits – listening, as if expecting a return.

When a minute passes in silence, he nods and makes an immediate beeline out of the alley.

Shadow Milk watches with muted interest as the boy runs up to a nearby house – it's a small thing, tucked into the corner with semi-wilted roses and a bird feeder tacked to the window. Rosquillo fumbles hastily with his satchel, pulling out one of the bags he'd received from their stops; he shakes it thrice and a small, copper key tumbles out into his palm. The boy shoves the key into the lock, prying open the door and immediately disappearing into the darkness of the house.

Interesting. Shadow Milk tilts his head consideringly, ignoring the smaller Cookie practically vibrating with excitement next to him. Less of a smash and grab, more of a planned hit? Why had one of the other Cookies given him the key? Were they thieves in arms, or simply getting a cut of the deal?

Rosquillo Cookie is quick in his work; it's only another minute before he reappears in the doorway, clutching his satchel tight to his chest as he hurries down the steps. He sprints across the alley, nodding breathlessly at them as he passes. "Come on, come on!"

"Did you get it?" Biscocho Cookie is hot on his heels, finally releasing his death grip on Shadow Milk to chase after his brother. "Did you, huh?"

"Yeah, I got it." Rosquillo motions to the left. "Let's go, before she gets back. Boss is waiting."

Well. Seems this little adventure is paying off after all.

Shadow Milk follows the pair as they lead him back down another series of alleys; most of it is back the way they came, but around the tenth bend Rosquillo takes a sharp right instead. There's nothing remarkable down this way, only an old fence and a pile of crates stacked

beside it – until Rosquillo gives them a push, sliding them out of the way to reveal a large hole in the wood. He gets on his hands and knees, ducking down to crawl through the gap; Biscocho Cookie excitedly follows after, practically wiggling on his belly through the dirt.

Yeah. Shadow Milk's not doing that.

“Boss!” Rosquillo Cookie's voice calls. “We're back!”

Shadow Milk's eyes roll, a distasteful grimace on his mouth. He reaches into his basket, grabbing his cane and twirling it in his palm; a quick tap and he's shrinking, stepping gingerly past looming blades of grass as he hurries through the hole. When he reaches the other side, Biscocho and Rosquillo are nowhere to be seen – but there's a glimmer of light ahead, a new path in the alleyway that seems to open up into something larger.

Another tap of his cane and Shadow Milk is back to full height; he dusts himself off, adjusting the cloak around his shoulders and stiffly straightening his back.

As Shadow Milk walks forward, the light gets gradually brighter; he can glimpse what looks like a courtyard coming into view, littered with stray, dead leaves and what seem to be chalk drawings on the stones. When he steps out into full view, he has to squint; the glow of a lantern hanging overhead feels blinding after nearly an hour in the darkness of the alleys.

Much like the plaza, there's a fountain in the middle of courtyard; unlike the plaza, this one seems to be bone dry. There's a few vines hanging off the edges, dirt caked on the stone – this place would look altogether abandoned, save for the small sets of outdoor tables and chairs scattered around.

Save for the very, very familiar face sitting on the fountain's edge.

“Boss!” Rosquillo Cookie is hurrying over, presenting the satchel with an ecstatic grin.

No.

“We got it!” Biscocho Cookie jumps around excitedly. “We got it, just like you said!”

No, no, no, no, no.

“Oh?” A sickeningly sincere smile, the gracefully lowered lashes that have haunted Shadow Milk's nightmares for months. “How wonderful! I was beginning to worry.”

“And,” Biscocho adds, bouncing on his heels, “we found a *princess*.”

Shadow Milk clenches down the urge to scream as Pure Vanilla's gaze slowly lifts to meet his own.

There is a tinny, ringing sensation in Shadow Milk's head; it feels like a strangled sort of silence, smothering out the happy chattering of the children as Pure Vanilla simply-

Looks at him.

It's revolting, makes his dough crawl with shuddering frustration to watch the other's milky eyes slowly trace over his form – because he knows. He knows Pure Vanilla knows it's him, knows by the subtle pulsing of their Soul Jams that he is being picked clean with each sweeping glance. The other's expression gives nothing away, the air of a passive observer as he tilts his head with a vague sort of perk to his brow.

And then Pure Vanilla is looking away, attention back to the children as he offers *them* a soft smile. "I see! A princess, you said?"

"She's magic."

"Is she now?"

"We escorted her." Biscocho's chest puffs out with pride. "We're *knight*s."

Rosquillo Cookie nods. "She said she had business with you."

"Well then," Pure Vanilla replies calmly, "I suppose she must."

The urge to scream is rising.

"Here." Rosquillo Cookie reaches into his satchel, pulling out a small slip of paper. He offers it to Pure Vanilla, adding: "I dropped off Silvana Cookie's gifts with a note, like you asked."

Gifts. *Gifts*?

"Thank you." Pure Vanilla takes the paper, unfolding it in his hands. "Do you have a pen?"

Rosquillo produces one from his bag; Pure Vanilla places the paper on his lap, scribbling something out before returning both items to the boy. "And Black Raisin Cookie didn't see you?"

"No." Rosquillo shakes his head. "It was close, though."

"I'm grateful." Pure Vanilla smiles warmly, reaching into his pocket. "I've felt just awful about forgetting to sign her card." Pure Vanilla produces a small pouch; from the way it jingles, no doubt filled with coin. "Do you think you can place the card back without being caught?"

"Of course, Boss!" Biscocho proclaims, hands on his hips. "We're excellent heisters!"

"That you are." Pure Vanilla leans forward, gently ruffling the boy's hair. "And I'm sure it will make for a wonderful surprise. Make sure to return Black Raisin Cookie's spare key when you're done, alright?"

"Come on." Rosquillo Cookie's taking his brother's hand, giving it a little tug. "Let's go. It's getting dark."

"Bye, Boss!" Biscocho waves excitedly, arms flailing as his brother drags him away. "Bye, Magic Princess!"

Shadow Milk says nothing, staring after the two in stunned silence as they disappear back down the alleyway. His mind's a mess, disbelief and ugly, nasty frustration twisting in his chest – the main source of which sits as calmly as can be, a soft smile still resting on his lips.

Of course. Of course he'd be behind this.

Shadow Milk turns on his heels, eyes narrowed to slits. “**Explain,**” he hisses through gritted teeth.

Pure Vanilla remains perfectly still; the only sign of recognition is a small tilt to his head. “They are children from my old village. Rosquillo Cookie run odd jobs for me from time to time.” His tone is disturbingly neutral – no amusement, no disdain. “We make a game of it for his younger brother.” A pause. “Does that explanation suffice?”

It – does, in a way; yet it still does nothing to lessen the blow.

Games. This had been just another one of Pure Vanilla's games.

“They said it was a heist.”

“Indeed. We thought calling it that might make fetching tasks a bit more exciting for Biscocho Cookie.” Pure Vanilla reaches to his side; briefly, Shadow Milk spots a series of tiny, loose braids swinging from golden hair. When Pure Vanilla turns back, there is a set of knitting needles and a patchwork pattern in his hands.

Shadow Milk continues to stare. “They called you Boss.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla replies calmly. He offers nothing else.

A long beat of silence stretches between them.

Pure Vanilla places pattern in his lap, glancing briefly at Shadow Milk as if posing a silent question.

Shadow Milk says nothing, pure disbelief choking out all sensible thought; Pure Vanilla seems to accept his silence as an answer; the other's gaze lowers as he takes his needles in hand, tapping them together twice before he just-

Starts.

Knitting.

Shadow Milk Cookie's grip on his cane tightens so fiercely it threatens to splinter.

“Is that it?”

Pure Vanilla doesn't so much as glance at him.

Shadow Milk fights back a snarl, swiftly tearing off the magic cloaking his form; he lunges through the air, all pretense dropped as he leans in to hover directly before the other's face.

“Hey,” he hisses, all teeth, all threat. “I’m *talking* to you.”

Pure Vanilla’s hands begin to still; his implacable gaze slowly lifts to meet Shadow Milk’s own.

“Yes?”

“Um, hello!” Shadow Milk gestures to himself wildly. “I am **right here**. What do you think you’re doing?”

Pure Vanilla’s blink feels deliberately slow. “Knitting.” His chin begins to tilt back down – before Shadow Milk catches it with the tip of his cane, forcing it back up.

“Haven’t I told you before? It’s **dangerous** to ignore me.”

Pure Vanilla’s lidded gaze remains wholly unimpressed. “Are you looking for my thoughts,” he queries dully, “or just my attention?”

Shadow Milk recoils as if struck; when several more beats of silence pass between them, Pure Vanilla’s gaze drops back down, his needles resuming their motions.

Infuriating. Petty. *Annoying*.

Shadow Milk forces a grin onto his face, cocking his head mockingly. “Oh, give me a break! What is this, hm? Some sort of *silent treatment*?”

“I am responding to you.” Toneless, unenthused. “You simply do not like my answers.”

Shadow Milk twists in the air, drifting in circles around the other. “Oh, *please*. You think being a boring old stick in the mud is gonna stop me?” Shadow Milk pokes Pure Vanilla’s cheek with his cane; no reaction. “Geez, don’t tell me you’re *sulking*. That’s real disappointing, Nilly, not gonna lie! So serious, and for what? Because I brightened up your oh-so dismal subjects’ day with some delightful tomfoolery?”

“I’m not sulking.” Pure Vanilla tugs on a thread of yarn that’s tangled itself. “I’m thinking.”

“About *what*?”

“I’m angry with you.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes instantly narrow.

“And,” Pure Vanilla continues tonelessly, “because I am angry, I am attempting to choose my words as carefully as I can.”

Shadow Milk’s lips twist with an ugly smirk, his arms folding across his chest. “Hey, don’t hang back on my account, Dollface. Go on, get it off your chest. Really let it *fly*.”

“Very well.” Pure Vanilla finally, *finally* sets his knitting down; he folds his hands in his lap, looking up to meet Shadow Milk’s expectant stare. “Then let me make my first thoughts

perfectly clear.” Another slow blink, an inhale of breath before:

“You do not need to be here.”

Shadow Milk’s smirk twists into an ugly sneer. “Oh, is *that*-”

“I do not mean,” Pure Vanilla interrupts, holding a hand up, “at the markets. We will get to that later. I mean here, in the Vanilla Kingdom. You, Shadow Milk Cookie, do not have to stay here because of me.”

Pure Vanilla’s watching him closely; Shadow Milk can all but feel the other’s steady gaze tracing the furrowed brow of Shadow Milk’s open displeasure. “Hah!” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, rolls them far enough that they flip around and rattle in his sockets. “That’s it? Cause I hate to break it to ya-”

“No,” Pure Vanilla continues smoothly, “it is not. I offered you a place within these lands sincerely, and I am not retracting that offer. But you do not *have* to be here. I will not be angry, and I will not withhold our connection if you change your mind about staying here.”

Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his back, leveling the other an unimpressed stare. “Ya done?”

“No,” Pure Vanilla repeats. “I have no solution for our... entanglement, for the time being. But, if you so choose, I am willing to treat any time together as simple satiation and part immediately after.” Pure Vanilla reaches up, touching his Soul Jam. “We do not have to spend extended time in each other’s company. We do not even have to speak to the other, if that’s what you really want. You may stay where you wish, for however long you wish, as I continue to look for a cure.”

The steadiness of Pure Vanilla’s words, the unwavering expression of calm – it’s unnerving. Shadow Milk stares down at him, uneasiness and irritation swirling inside him as he toys with the cane in his palm. “Huh!” he says finally, averting his gaze to place a false smile on his lips. “How *bold*! I’ve really gotten to you, hm? And here I thought you were baked with sterner stuff!”

“Do not mistake willingness for desire.”

Shadow Milk blinks, his gaze flicking back to meet Pure Vanilla’s. “Huh?”

“I am willing to do this.” Pure Vanilla holds his gaze unwaveringly. “It does not mean I want to. I want you to remain here, with me. I enjoy your company, and I enjoy our time together. That has not changed simply because you frustrate me at times.”

A strange sensation twists in Shadow Milk’s chest.

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues, “though I have said this before, I will say it again – I will not cage you. If you truly feel that my presence is a shackle, I will not resist your choice to break away from me.” Then Pure Vanilla is turning away, reaching for his knitting as he repositions it in his lap. “If that is the case, we may end the conversation here. Even if my own desires

conflict, I will respect your right to choose to where you want to be. You do not deserve to have that taken away from you again.”

Silence reigns again, broken only by the soft, intermittent clicking of Pure Vanilla’s needles.

There are very few things that can leave Shadow Milk speechless – this seems to be one of them. Absurdly blunt, revoltingly to the point. Where is the game, the chase? It’s disappointing, dizzyingly so, to watch Pure Vanilla just...

Give in.

“Huh!” Shadow Milk twirls his cane; he’s looking everywhere but Pure Vanilla. “Gotta say, I’m surprised! Not like you to just – throw in the towel! I mean, knowing you, I was half-expecting an *apology* for your little lightshow-”

“There are actions I regret.” Pure Vanilla loops another thread through his needles. “Things I think I would do differently, if given the chance. Would you like to hear them?”

Shadow Milk perks a curious brow, leaning in closer. “Oh? The great Pure Vanilla Cookie, admitting when he’s wrong? Well, now you’ve got me *curious*.”

“If I tell you,” Pure Vanilla asks mildly, “will you consider staying?”

A scoff – my, he really *is* bold today. “Pheh! We’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

“Alright.” The knitting is set back down, Pure Vanilla’s gaze lifting again. “I should have invited you to the markets.”

Hah! A swell of triumph rises up in Shadow Milk’s chest; he grins ear to ear. “Aw, Nilly! I knew you’d come around. And here you were kicking up such a fuss over a few little-”

“No,” Pure Vanilla corrects, a hint of sharpness creeping back into his tone. “That is not what I mean. We will get to that later.”

Ugh, there’s that *later* again.

“What I mean,” Pure Vanilla continues, “is that I should have considered you more when making my plans for the day, and how you might perceive being excluded.”

“What?” Shadow Milk drawls, flipping over in the air. “Gonna give me some sob story now? Don’t pretend you wanted me here; lies aren’t fun when they’re *that* obvious.”

“I didn’t want you here,” Pure Vanilla replies bluntly.

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow again; Pure Vanilla merely sighs in response.

“I needed a day amongst the citizens. I’ve been neglecting them during our transitory period, and with you around...” Another sigh, longer and tinged with a hint of a smile. “You...”

“I?” Shadow Milk perks a brow. “I what? Go on. I’m radiant, dazzling, I’d upstage you at every turn?”

“In a way,” Pure Vanilla hums. “You... hm.” Visible hesitation. “You... *command* a lot of my attention. If you had come, I knew my focus would be almost solely on you. I’d be thinking about your comfort, your interactions with the citizens instead of the needs and wants I’d come to address in the first place.”

Shadow Milk’s grip on his cane tightens. “If I didn’t know you knew better,” he says, voice pitching low with dangerous intent, “I’d *almost* think you were calling me *needy*.”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, visibly considering. “Let’s call you... captivating.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk averts his gaze, fighting the immediate urge to preen. “You’re not wrong.”

“That being said,” Pure Vanilla continues, “I did not consider your feelings properly. I have been trying to make my home pleasing to you by limiting your interactions with other Cookies while you adjusted, and offering games – as you said – as a distraction. A distraction I’d hoped you’d enjoy, but a distraction nonetheless.” A pause. “I did not trust you to tell me what you needed, so I acted on my own presumptions.”

“Well,” Shadow Milk drawls. “You know what they say about assuming.”

“Indeed.” Another pause. “You were forcibly isolated from other Cookies, from the entire world for a very long time. I should have given that more thought before dismissing my staff and excluding you from that choice.”

Shadow Milk’s lip curls in a sneer, dark and ugly. “My, my, my! How *so* very kind of you to be considerate of my precious, fragile *feelings*.” He flicks his cane; the air around them instantly darkens, clouding out the slim rays of sun overhead.

Pure Vanilla’s gaze follows the movement. “You seem to do this a lot when you’re upset.”

“Eyes on me!” Shadow Milk snaps; Pure Vanilla’s placid stare obediently slides back.

“I,” Shadow Milk hisses, looming close, “do not **need** other Cookies. I do not need your *pity*, or oh-so noble *compassion*, or any other revoltingly self-indulgent *tripe* you come up with in that empty little head of yours. I am **Shadow Milk Cookie**, and anything I want, I will take for myself. Whether *you* or *anybody else in my way* likes it or not.”

“I do not pity you.”

The reply is firm; there is no warmth, no waver in it as Pure Vanilla leans forward, narrowing the space between them. “You have made your choices,” he continues. “You have hurt many, many Cookies. You have hurt my people, my friends, and most of all, you have hurt me. Of all the things I feel for you, pity is not one of them.”

Shadow Milk’s sneer deepens; something unnamable twists in his chest.

“On that topic,” Pure Vanilla is rising to his feet, taking hold of his staff as he straightens his back. “I should make one other thing clear as well.”

“Oh?” Shadow Milk queries, voice sickeningly sweet. “Whatever could it be?”

“You do not serve me, and I do not serve you. So, I will rectify my earlier commands concerning games and rules and say this solely as a warning.” Pure Vanilla closes his eyes briefly, touching the Soul Jam on his chest. “If you bring harm to the Cookies of this kingdom, or any I call friend, I will fight you. I have no desire to use my powers in this way, nor do I desire to strike you down. But I will not turn a blind eye, nor hold back if this is the path you choose to take.”

Shadow Milk’s own Soul Jam pulses, a chilling numbness that quickly fades. “**Hah!**” he laughs, ignoring the sensation as his arms fold across his chest. “Already forgetting things in your old age? If I crumble, you crumble. Any pain you inflict on me, you’re getting *riiiight* back.”

“I have always been willing to lay down my life for my people.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze is steady, his tone absolute. “This, too, has not changed. I will not allow my people to suffer to spare myself, and I will not stand idly by if you force my hand.”

Tension visibly builds around them; Shadow Milk’s darkness deepens, creeping closer along the cobblestones while light glimmers dangerously within Pure Vanilla’s staff.

It’d be easy. It’d be so, so easy to strike, to lash out and carve through this foolish, insignificant gnat’s dough. To teach him, here and now, who holds the real power in their Jam, to show him just what happens to those who try and challenge Shadow Milk Cookie in a true fight to the end.

It would be easy.

Would it be worth it?

“Keeping all this in mind,” Pure Vanilla continues, “I would like to repeat myself. I enjoy your company. I like spending my days with you. If you are willing to permit me, I would like to remain at your side. I think, in time, I can make you happy here.”

Shadow Milk’s darkness falters, ever so slightly; he quickly recomposes himself, scoffing as he tilts his head. “What, seriously? You’re still deluding yourself with that?”

“It is no delusion,” Pure Vanilla counters easily. “As taxing as it can be, I do find your presence enjoyable.”

“Not just delusional, but as blind to fate as those little milk-spots you call eyes.” Shadow Milk floats higher, tightening his grip on his folded arms. “There’s no happy end to this weird fantasy of me you’ve concocted. You want the **Beast of Deceit** to retract his claws? You think you’re going to tame me into some milquetoast house pet that sings happy little songs and frolics through the fields with you?”

Pure Vanilla has the gall to smile. “Not at all. I can hardly imagine a worse fate.”

Shadow Milk spreads his arms wide with disbelief. “Then what? What could *possibly* be your solution to *what I am*? Cause buddy, the way I see it, the only way our story ends is in a pile of crumbs.”

“I don’t know.”

Shadow Milk just stares.

“I don’t have a solution.” Pure Vanilla fiddles with the ribbon on his staff. “I think, if there is one, you’ll be the one to find it.”

A scoff; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, shaking his head. “You really are an old fool.”

“Perhaps. But,” Pure Vanilla continues, “for all your faults, a lack of cleverness hardly one of them. So I have every confidence that you’ll be able to figure it out.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “*What* faults?”

Pure Vanilla hums non-committedly; he picks up his knitting and pockets it, before turning towards the back of the rightmost building and motioning at it with his staff. “This is the Crown’s Nest Inn; we’re in their back courtyard now, though it may not look like it. We haven’t had a chance to renovate this part of the kingdom for some time, I’m afraid.” Pure Vanilla pauses, as if waiting for a reply Shadow Milk does not give. “The entrance is on the opposite side of this wall. You are free to join me within, once you’ve made up your mind.”

“Made up my mind?” Shadow Milk repeats incredulously.

“About coming or going, staying or leaving. As I said, I’ll respect your choice.” Pure Vanilla is already shuffling off, the tap of his staff echoing on the stones. “Though,” he calls back, “I have a gift for you, if you do come.”

Shadow Milk scoffs again, re-folding his arms across his chest. “Dollface, I just told you,” he remarks loudly, voice carrying across the courtyard. “Anything I want, I can just take for myself!”

“Perhaps.” Pure Vanilla is glancing back, a soft smile on his lips. “But isn’t it nice to be given it freely?”

And then he is gone, slipping down the alley before Shadow Milk has the chance to muster a reply.

Coming or going, staying or leaving?

I have every confidence that you’ll be able to figure it out.

Chapter 7

He's not going inside.

Shadow Milk had decided that pretty quickly; there'd been no internal debate, no long-suffering back and forths in his head about it. Pure Vanilla can lay down all the challenges he likes, can bat his stupidly long lashes and smile his vague little smiles – Shadow Milk Cookie is not going inside.

The inn stares back at him from across the courtyard, taunting him as Shadow Milk sits cross-legged in the air and-

It's not a pout. It's frustration, boredom, a persistent sort of rage that never seems to abate after more than a minute in Pure Vanilla's presence.

The gall. The gall! The sheer pretentiousness of it all, to act as if Shadow Milk's freedom is something on offer. As if he needs Pure Vanilla's gentle voice to reassure him that he is free to go and do as he likes.

You do not need to be here.

Shadow Milk is well aware of his freedom. Shadow Milk may be a creature of cunning, but he is not above taking what he needs by force. His powers dwarf every insignificant speck of a Cookie milling about these streets; he can level this kingdom in the blink of an eye if he so chose.

Which makes Pure Vanilla's half-baked attempt at – what, reconciliation? – all that more grating.

Do not mistake willingness for desire.

Stupid little doormat. Pointing out the obvious, then daring to tack on his sugary-sweet slop?

I want you to remain here, with me.

Shadow Milk sneers at the sky. His ivory tower awaits with open arms; Pure Vanilla had made that perfectly clear from the get-go. Distance spanning continents worsened the pull of the bond; relative proximity left them more time, more days to go without before being forced into their awkward... *embraces*.

Well, forced on Shadow Milk's side, anyway. Pure Vanilla's never turned him down once.

I enjoy your company.

Ridiculous.

I enjoy our time together.

Repulsive. Delusions are all well and good – Candy Apple Cookie’s can be on par with Shadow Milk’s own from time to time – but Pure Vanilla isn’t playing properly. He’s not hiding from his ugly little truths, getting wrapped up in a lie so wonderful he’ll never want to resurface. He’s presenting his absurdity *as* truth, insisting upon it, refusing to see the rotting apple in his hands for what it is.

Speaking of...

Shadow Milk’s gaze slides back to his basket, discarded on the floor in his fury when he’d uncloaked. The apples he’d so tirelessly worked to steal now lay strewn about on the cobblestones, all scuffed and dirtied.

Great. Another one of his things Pure Vanilla has ruined.

The issue now is Shadow Milk... isn’t quite sure what to do next. He’s not going inside – that’s been well established – but he’s also not really feeling the markets for the moment. The children had been a disappointment; bright enough, with a promising enthusiasm for stealing in the youngest, but a disappointment nonetheless. He could slip back into Lady Milk Crown Cookie and find a besotted young thing to torment; but even she feels dismissive, uninterested in the back of his mind.

Shadow Milk, reluctantly, admits he’s just feeling a bit tired of it all.

The lazy allure of curling back up in his bed and drifting through the waning hours of the day is certainly appealing – but his room is in the castle, and he’s also decided he’s not going back there either.

So where *is* he going?

Another glance at the inn; another dismissive sneer and sharp turn of his head.

No.

A crow caws overhead; Shadow Milk follows its movements as it alights on the inn’s roof, ruffling its feathers and pecking at a wing. His gaze then slides downwards, down to the lowest floor where a brightly-lit, if not still somewhat grimy window glistens promisingly.

Hm.

Shadow Milk’s not going in, but perhaps there’s no harm in sneaking a little peek. Maybe seeing such a dark and dismal-looking place’s shabby interior will cheer him.

A quick flit through the shadows and he’s at the window; the lights within glow, casting long silhouettes on the stones outside. Evening has already begun slipping into the first vestiges of night, leaving ample shadows for Shadow Milk to cloak his form in as he presses his face to the window.

The inn is – not as shabby as he’d expected. The wooden floors are polished, gleaming beneath the ample candlelight littered about the place. There’s a well-kept bar counter, a smattering of tables and chairs filled with Cookies happily chatting away, mugs in hands and

smiles on their faces. The largest table lies in the center of the room; there's a raucous group seated there, shouting and swinging their mugs with open joy as they clap each other on the back and bump shoulder-to-shoulder. A rather motley crew, some vaguely familiar faces, and-

Pure Vanilla Cookie, smiling brightly with them all.

Shadow Milk pulls away from the window, scowling to himself as he slinks away from the inn. Loud, obnoxious Cookies, visibly celebrating together, and Pure Vanilla cheering with the best of them. Shadow Milk had half-expected – he doesn't know. *Some* air of solemnity? A figure sitting alone, nervously awaiting a decision he *claims* to be asking for?

Doesn't matter. Shadow Milk's not going inside.

He folds his arms across his chest, floating on his back in mid-air as he closes his eyes and wills the pinch of irritation from his brow. It doesn't matter what Pure Vanilla Cookie is doing, or who he's with, or what he wants. It doesn't matter what sort of pathetic trinket he's conjured up for a gift to entice Shadow Milk into his lair; it can't be anything that grand, nothing spectacular enough to warrant Shadow Milk's presence. He's barely curious about it at all.

He's a little curious.

Still, not enough to act upon. With nothing to do, nowhere to go and a heavy feeling of fatigue settling in, Shadow Milk simply... floats there. The cool night air feels pleasant on his dough; the darkening sky a pleasant blanket to rest his eyes under. He could nap here, like this. It's no silken-sheeted bed, but it's here, free, completely unattached to any needy little half-Cookies and their despicably soft gaze.

An image of Pure Vanilla Cookie laughing at the inn's table flits through his mind; Shadow Milk dismisses it sharply, turning over in mid-air and tightening his grip on his arms.

He's not sure how much time passes, exactly – he dozes off at some point, drifting between slumber and periods of flickering wakefulness. The chill in the air is approaching something less tolerable; Shadow Milk turns over again, shifting restlessly as he wills his eyes to remain shut.

“Hey.”

A voice rings through the air; though its tone is calm, the suddenness is enough to stiffen Shadow Milk's shoulders – he bolts upwards and whips his head around, cracking his neck in a full circle as he scans his surroundings.

The courtyard is empty; save for one lone crow, pecking at the remains of his discarded apples.

A brusque laugh follows. “Up here.”

Shadow Milk snaps his gaze upwards to the inn's balcony; there's an amused smile being directed his way, along with a singular, startlingly familiar iris shining in the dark.

Overhead, a crow caws.

"Hey," Black Raisin Cookie repeats. Her posture is relaxed, a half-empty bottle of cider held loosely in her hand as she leans on the inn's upper railing. "Shadow Milk Cookie, right?" A crow alights on the balcony next to her; it too caws before she shushes it with a wave of her hand.

Shadow Milk says nothing; he merely perks a brow.

She knows him?

"My crows have been keeping an eye on you," she remarks, swirling the bottle once before continuing: "Sorry, I should ask – do you prefer Lady Milk Crown Cookie instead?"

Ah. A *close* eye, it seems.

Shadow Milk pushes off from the ground; as he floats upwards, he watches her track the movement with a gaze that is impossibly sharp and deceptively relaxed at the same time. When he's finally hovering at her level, inches away from the railing, he folds his arms behind his back and leans into a half-bow. "My, my, my," he remarks lightly. "Black Raisin Cookie."

She smiles, eyes sharpening for a split-second. "Shadow Milk Cookie."

"Protector of the Abandoned Village."

"Beast of Deceit."

Shadow Milk's own smile curves wickedly. "Ah! I see my reputation proceeds me. A fan, are we?"

Black Raisin Cookie takes a swig of her cider, adding a noncommittal shrug. "He talks about you." She does not elaborate on the he - nor does she need to. "We ran into each other at the seeds stall today. Asked me to keep a look out for you."

Shadow Milk's smile twists into a sneer. "Baby-sitting duty? How far the mighty protector has fallen."

"Not really," she replies easily. "I call it 'keeping tabs on the most dangerously malevolent and powerful being in the entire kingdom.'"

"Oh! You *flatterer*, you."

Black Raisin Cookie perks a brow. "He called it 'looking out for a friend'."

Gross.

“Anyways...” Shadow Milk twirls his cane, folding one arm across his chest. “What is this, then? You here to give me a warning too? Touch my Cookies and I’ll crumble you, yada yada?”

“No.” Black Raisin Cookie shakes her head. “You’re not my fight. Threatening a being like you would be meaningless, and only serve to further endanger the Cookies under my care.”

“Smart Cookie!” Shadow Milk leans in closer. “Do tell, then. For what purpose has the oh-so loyal Black Raisin Cookie drawn my attention?”

Black Raisin Cookie raises her nearly-drained bottle, cocking it to the side. “I thought we could drink together.”

Shadow Milk levels her an unimpressed stare. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve been staying up at the castle.” She nods past his shoulder in the direction of the towering spires. “Mostly alone, from what the on-leave staff has been saying. Stuck up there with Pure Vanilla Cookie for, what, well over a week now? Two?”

“So?”

“So,” she repeats, a renewed smile tugging at her lips, “I thought it’d be interesting to have a drink with the only other Cookie on Earthbread who could possibly understand how *annoying* he is to live with.”

A beat passes between them; Shadow Milk stares at her while she tilts her head, staring expectantly back.

Then a wild, wicked grin splits Shadow Milk’s face.

“My dear!” He claps his hands together; the air fills with glimmering bottles, bursting with berry juice. “Oh, why didn’t you *say* so? And here I was, thinking you were just another dull, boring pile of crumbs in the making. Where was this energy back in the village, hm? Oh, you were so *serious* then!”

Black Raisin Cookie lowers her glass. “You know me from the village?”

“Call it a case of shared memories, don’t overthink it.” Shadow Milk waves his hand at the bottles floating about him. “What’s your poison? A nice dark Redberry, or something light and sparkling? Oh, how about something from before the Dark Flour War?”

“I-” Black Raisin Cookie blinks. “I’ll let you pick. You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, you *are* a smart Cookie. The red, then.” Shadow Milk flicks his wrist, sending the other bottles scattering to the winds; they loudly shatter on the pavement below as he uncorks the red and gives it a sniff. “Hm! Raspberry Vineyards, if I’m not mistaken.”

Black Raisin Cookie peers over the railing at the scattering of glass around the fountain. “Children play down there.”

“Don’t spoil my theatrics,” Shadow Milk retorts. “Now, have a seat.”

“There’s no-” A sharp gasp of surprise as she’s scooped into mid-air, a swiftly-conjured cushion sweeping her legs out from under her. She tightly grips the cloth with her hand, struggling to find her balance as Shadow Milk taps the bottle with his cane, producing two glimmering wine glasses filled to the brim.

“Here,” he says, holding one out to her. “Swirl it first.”

Black Raisin Cookie glances unsteadily between him and the ground, her one hand still holding on for dear life.

“Oh please,” Shadow Milk sighs with a roll of his eyes. “You won’t fall. I’m not going to *crumble* you now that you’ve only just piqued my interest.”

Hesitantly, Black Raisin Cookie releases her grip. She slowly takes the glass, swirling it once before glancing back up at Shadow Milk.

“There we are.” Shadow Milk settles down, folding his legs in mid-air as he takes a single sip from his glass. “Now then!” A smile, all teeth. “Tell me *alllll* the things you **hate** about Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“I don’t hate him,” Black Raisin Cookie corrects. “But,” she adds hastily as Shadow Milk’s smile drops, “he can be very difficult to live with.”

“Don’t *I* know it.” Shadow Milk swirls his glass. “Though I must say, I’m surprised. I thought you two were all goody-two-shoes, buddy-buddy back in the village. Partners in arms, as I recall.”

Black Raisin scoffs. “In a way. I suppose he’d remember it like that. But-” She hesitates, then sighs. “Listen, here’s a question for you.”

“Hm?”

She leans slightly forward, face suddenly serious. “In all your time living together so far – have you *ever* seen him eat something?”

Shadow Milk considers her question; he takes a slow sip from his glass, mentally ticking back through the days. Their time in the kitchens – no, he’d been drinking then. Tea, or some such. Over their games, maybe? Nothing particular comes to mind. Finally, he remarks: “Well, there were quite a few buzzing little gnats shoving plates under his face in the markets.”

“Ah.” Black Raisin Cookie shakes her head. “Doesn’t count. That’s someone forcing him. What I mean is, have you seen him eat without someone else *making* him?”

“Mmm...” Shadow Milk hums, clicking his tongue. “Guess not.”

Black Raisin waves her hand wildly, the wine in her glass threatening to spill. “See!!”

Shadow Milk cocks a brow. “See what?”

“He *doesn't take care of himself*. Never has, maybe never will.” Black Raisin’s shifting in agitation; Shadow Milk doesn’t share the sentiment, but it’s amusing to watch. “He’s always putting other Cookies first and *never* thinking about himself. Do you know *how many times* I’d find him passed out somewhere, out cold from overworking and undereating?”

“No,” Shadow Milk muses. “Though I suppose the old fool wouldn’t remember being unconscious.”

“How many times he’d pass on food I *specifically saved* for him, food he *needed* to keep his healing magic flowing, only to pass it on to anyone who so much as glanced at it?” Black Raisin furiously tilts her glass back, draining it in three big gulps before slamming it back down on her cushion. “No matter how many times we argued, no matter how many times I pointed out he can’t help properly running on fumes, he doesn’t listen!”

She’s venting. Shadow Milk’s being vented on. “No, go on. Really let him have it,” he remarks dryly.

Black Raisin sighs, leaning back on her cushion. “Sorry. It’s just-” She lifts her hand, rubbing at her face. “It’s really annoying how he refuses to depend on other people. Even with no sight, no idea who he was, no way to defend himself – he never let me in, never let anyone shoulder his burdens. And it drove me crazy.”

Shadow Milk simply sips at his drink.

“Sorry,” Black Raisin repeats, reaching down to offer her glass. “May I have another?”

“Only if you don’t wolf it down like an animal again.” Still, Shadow Milk floats the bottle over, pouring it gently into her glass. “While I totally get where you’re coming from – finding him a nuisance, a hypocrite, an *utter* drain on your soul - I’m afraid I’m just not in the habit of *caring for* or *looking after* him.”

“It’s not just that.” Black Raisin Cookie at least has the good graces to swirl the wine before she takes another too-large sip. “It’s knowing someone’s going to have to pick up his pieces when he falls. That he’s too stubborn to ask for what he really needs, or to even admit it to himself.”

Interesting.

“He’s quite a skilled liar,” Shadow Milk remarks idly. “I would know.”

“Also.” Black Raisin bites her lower lip, casting her gaze to the side. “He...”

Shadow Milk leans in. “Yes?”

Black Raisin sighs. “He snores. So. Loud.”

A blink, then Shadow Milk grins ear to ear.

Now they're getting somewhere.

--

Black Raisin Cookie is surprisingly enjoyable to talk to. Perhaps it's the liquid happiness warming his jam, perhaps it's how precisely she cuts through all of Pure Vanilla's foibles – but he likes her. Sincerely.

How strange it is to see how she's changed. He remembers her fighting tooth and claw to carve out a life for her village; he remembers her being so curt, so proud, so vicious. All admirable qualities, really, but city life seems to have softened her gaze a bit.

That or, again, the liquid happiness she's drained four cups of.

"You're smiling."

Shadow Milk glances up; he'd been eyeing his fifth glass with a vacant stare, a few half-muddled thoughts on his mind. He's not drunk, not *really* – but there's a very pleasant buzz beneath his dough. "Hm?"

"You're smiling," Black Raisin Cookie repeats; she's smiling too. "What are you thinking about?"

Honestly, he can't really remember.

Shadow Milk perks a brow. "Why do you care if I'm smiling?"

Black Raisin sloppily shrugs her shoulder. "Just good. There was two sadsacks at my party. Now there's only one."

"Sadsacks?"

Black Raisin lifts her hand. "You," she says, pointing directly at Shadow Milk, "and..." Her hand drifts down, gesturing below. "Him."

Slowly, another word filters through Shadow Milk's mind.

"Wait, party?"

"Mhm." Black Raisin shrugs again. "'S my birthday."

Shadow Milk glances at their surroundings. "Hate to break it to you kid, but this ain't exactly a party."

"Nah." She points again. "Down there. 'S fine, I already did it. I like other Cookies, I do, but I like my space, y'know? So they're doing the party more down there, and I hang up out here

and then it's all good, y'know?"

Well, she's *definitely* drunk.

Still – she's once again piqued Shadow Milk's interest. "Who's the other sadsack?" he queries.

Black Raisin rolls her eyes. "Oh, please."

As wonderfully warm as Shadow Milk's head feels, he's still no fool to implications. "Pure Vanilla Cookie?"

Black Raisin throws back her head, rolling her eyes once more.

Shadow Milk will take that as a yes. "He seemed happy as a rancid little clam, last I checked."

A scoff; Black Raisin's eyebrows lift. "Thought you two were close."

The air around them darkens; she abruptly shuts her mouth. "We're not," Shadow Milk replies after a moment.

Aside from a wretched little soul-link, but that's neither here nor there.

"Well," she continues carefully, "I've lived with him long enough to know when he's moping. He's doing the staff thing."

Shadow Milk sets his glass down; it hovers in the air in delicate balance. "What staff thing?"

"The grabbing," Black Raisin says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The two-hands thing."

"Humor me," Shadow Milk drawls, "and elaborate?"

A long, drawn-out sigh. "He does this." Black Raisin mimics grabbing the air with her singular hand. "But, y'know. With two." Shadow Milk stares at her, unimpressed; she sighs again. "If he's upset," she says slowly, "he holds his staff with both hands. And he was doing that the *whooooole* time I was down there."

Hm.

"C'mon, go look." Black Raisin Cookie nods her head towards the inn. "You'll see. He's probably still doing it."

Shadow Milk considers it; he swirls the remaining drops of juice in his cup, watching flecks of red stick weakly to the glass. He doesn't *really* want to go back down there; he's quite comfortable where he is. There's no real need to disrupt this tiny droplet of contentment in an otherwise putrid day.

Still – there’s a flicker of interest beneath the pleasant buzzing in his mind. Pure Vanilla, moping about? At a party, no less?

“Go on,” Black Raisin prompts again, and Shadow Milk sighs.

“Fine.” He grabs his cane, unfolding his legs as he stands – and immediately wobbles, clutching his head as his vision sharply blurs.

Whoah. Alright, he’s a *little* drunk.

Black Raisin Cookie raises a brow. “You okay there?”

Shadow Milk dismisses her with a wave of his cane; she sharply plummets, a startled cry ripped from her lips as she scrambles helplessly in midair – only to jerk to a sudden halt, face inches from the ground. “Wh-” she gasps, eyes wide.

“Calm down.” Shadow Milk floats down to hover beside her; another flick of his cane and she drops, hitting the pavement with a soft *thud*. “See? You’re fine.”

Black Raisin pushes herself off the ground, rubbing her face as she stumbles to her feet. A scowl as she accuses: “You said I wouldn’t fall.”

“Yeah, hold *me* to a promise. See how far that gets you.” Shadow Milk floats towards the windows, hands folded behind his back. “Now show me the moping.”

Black Raisin Cookie shuffles over beside him; her own stance is unsteady, a rocking sway as she leans on the brick wall and presses her face to the window. Her hazy eyes scan the room several times over, face gently illuminated in the orange glow of the lights within. Then, she lifts her hand, tapping at the glass: “See? Right there.”

Shadow Milk floats closer, nudging her with a slight hip bump as he peers through the dirty glass.

The scene is more or less the same as he’d left it; there’s a few less Cookies about, a few more slumped drunkenly at tables. There’s a Cookie belting a song out atop a table - the innkeep, surprisingly, doesn’t seem to mind, too busy wiping down mugs at the counter. In the middle of it all, there’s still a bustling table, still Cookies laughing and clapping each other on the back, still –

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

“Told you,” Black Raisin Cookie remarks; Shadow Milk perks a brow. There’s no trace of distress on Pure Vanilla’s face; he’s smiling, laughing with another Cookie that ruffles his hair in a show of sickening closeness. From all accounts, he looks perfectly content – there’s no expository pulse in Shadow Milk’s Soul Jam to indicate otherwise.

“He’s fine.”

Black Raisin Cookie rolls her eyes. “Hands.”

Shadow Milk lazily lowers his gaze to Pure Vanilla's hands – and they are, indeed, grasped tightly around his staff.

He's never really taken notice of that before.

"You call *that* moping?" Shadow Milk says dismissively. "I've seen mopier."

Over a plush toy, no less.

"Moping in public." Black Raisin Cookie has turned away from the window, slumping against the wall as she rubs tiredly at her face. "Or sometimes he's nervous, or angry, or whatever. He always clings to that thing when he's upset. Call it a tell."

"Hm." Shadow Milk continues gazing through the window, watching as Pure Vanilla reaches for a stray mug, taking a hearty swig before placing it back down.

His hand, immediately, returns to his staff.

Interesting.

"I drank too much," Black Raisin Cookie mumbles from the side; Shadow Milk ignores her, toying with his cane as he watches Pure Vanilla Cookie through the window and simply...

Considers.

They sit in silence; Black Raisin, clutching her head, and Shadow Milk alternating his gaze between the window and the sky. The gentle black of night has consumed their surroundings; even the flickering lamp on the far end of the courtyard struggles to pierce the pleasant darkness. High above a pattern of stars sprawls across the sky, each a glittering pinpoint of light, a single blemish in an otherwise perfect abyss.

He knows the constellations well. They'd always been a singularly fascinating point of subject for other Cookies, young and old alike. Their names are meaningless, images of beasts and heroes they're claimed to elicit conjured from fantasies alone – they are stars, nothing more, nothing less. There is little meaning to them beyond the power that can be woven from their fall; yet time after time even the simplest Cookies will chase after them with eyes full of glimmering wonder.

The moon hangs high, a waning crescent – and a stray, passing thought flickers in Shadow Milk's mind.

"Black Raisin Cookie."

She grunts, slid all the way down to the floor now.

Shadow Milk stares up at the sky a moment longer, before finally asking: "Do you know anything about a blue moon garden?"

Black Raisin Cookie cracks open an eye, fixing him with a hazy look of befuddlement. "Huh?"

Foolishness.

“Ah, forget it!” Shadow Milk rises through the air, his trademark grin firmly back in place. “Hey, you look *awful*! Guess a country girl like you really can’t hold her drink, huh?”

Black Raisin simply groans again. “What was *in* that stuff?”

“The finest ingredients, crafted by the best brewers of the last 500 years. Thank you for noticing.” Shadow Milk summons his jester cap, sweeping into a mock bow before her. “Well, my thoroughly pickled lady, I must take my leave. Do try not to walk into *too* many fence posts on your way back, hm?”

“Wait.” Black Raisin Cookie is pushing herself, struggling to her feet with another pained grunt. “Where’re *you* going?”

“Eh.” Shadow Milk shrugs, gesturing to the inn. “Can’t make an appearance on principle, but think I’ll slink around in the shadows for a bit, do some spying. Based on how many empty bottles I spotted, it’s right about the time Cookies start blurting out all their nasty little secrets. And hey,” he adds with a carefree shrug, “if Nilly’s *really* a moping little sadsack in there, maybe I’ll get to see him burst into tiny, little, miserable tears. Wouldn’t that be *fun*?”

Black Raisin stares at him a minute, an odd, unreadable emotion crossing her face. Finally, she blinks her eyes and asks:

“Why do you want to see him hurt so much?”

She gets no answer; with a flick of his cane she’s sent sprawling backwards into the streets, tumbling along the cobblestones before she scrambles to right herself. Whatever she shouts back at him is a slew of incomprehensible cursing but Shadow Milk barely hears it, already slipping away through the cracks in the wood.

The shadows of his darkness make for a much better conversation partner anyway.

Chapter 8

All in all, it doesn't take too terribly long for the party to die down.

Another half-hour or so, several more mugs poured and songs sung and slowly, eventually, Cookies start filtering out of the bar to stumble drunkenly into the streets. Candles are snuffed one by one, plates and glasses are cleared as the innkeep bustles from table to table; eventually, the only Cookies left are the handful remaining at Pure Vanilla's table. Even their raucous chorus of cheers has quieted, more contemplative and slow conversations drifting through the air over small cups of coffee to keep them wakeful.

Shadow Milk isn't really listening either way. The shadows cast across the ceiling by long wooden beams have been a perfect place to resume his dozing; the warmth of the gentle fire crackling in the hearth perfectly balanced against the chilly draft seeping through the patchwork roof.

He'd hoped for some juicy secrets, some nasty little tidbits that all Cookies seem to share with loosened tongues – flirtatious wives, duplicitous trades, that sort of thing. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, the only thing the Cookies around Pure Vanilla have to share are tedious old stories about 'the good old days' from the village, along with teasing jabs about his robes, his hair, his absence.

Pure Vanilla has taken it all in stride; for the few minutes Shadow Milk's bothered to tune in, the other's been chuckling and conversing with the best of them. Pure Vanilla's hands haven't left his staff, true, but his perfect countenance hasn't wavered even a crack as he smiles warmly through it all.

If Black Raisin Cookie had spoken true, Shadow Milk can't help but feel a little titillated at how smoothly the other lies.

Eventually the bar is closed and last candle is snuffed; the innkeep goes so far as to actively clear the table in front of them, plucking the glass from the largest Cookie's hands with a perk of his brow. There's a few groans, some drunken wheedling that leads nowhere and finally, the last of the Cookies push themselves up and say their farewells.

Curiously, Pure Vanilla remains – still sitting on his stool, still sipping at his tea. With the bar quiet now, Shadow Milk notices the other's frequent glances at the window, the way he shifts in his seat every few seconds before casting his gaze down into his mug.

"Staying the night?" The innkeep is polishing up the last of the glasses; he hadn't kicked Pure Vanilla out with the rest, but that's hardly surprising. "You know there's always a room for you here if you need it."

"I'm not sure." Pure Vanilla's tired gaze lifts, another perfect smile in place. "But I appreciate your kindness."

The innkeep shrugs with a smile of his own. "Anything for Healer Cookie."

Pure Vanilla laughs; it rings oddly, tinged with a strange sort of melancholy. “I haven’t been called that in quite some time.”

Another shrug as the innkeep sets the glass down. “Not a bad title, in my opinion. Good memories with it for me.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla replies, smile softening slightly. “I suppose so.” He glances out the window yet again; there’s visible hesitation before he continues: “May I.. step outside a moment? Before you lock up?”

“Of course. I’m not going to shut the doors on you.”

“Thank you.” Pure Vanilla pushes himself up from his stool, leaning heavily on his staff. “I’ll just be a moment.”

Shadow Milk watches silently as Pure Vanilla shuffles across the room; as he slips out the inn door, Shadow Milk melds back into the cracks between the wood, sliding through until he can peer along the outside of the walls.

Pure Vanilla strides through the darkness with surprising ease; his pace is quickened, not slow and careful as he rounds the inn’s corner, footfalls loudly announcing his presence in the silence of the night. Shadow Milk slithers along as he follows the other around another turn, a dip in the path, a quick duck to the right –

Ah.

Back in the courtyard.

Pure Vanilla openly scans his surroundings; his face is unreadable, milky eyes picking through what little his staff illuminates. Shadow Milk watches as the other’s gaze travels over the shattered glass of the bottles, the discarded basket, the half-pecked apples strewn about on the stones.

A gust of wind brushes past, rustling Pure Vanilla’s robes. He raises his gaze towards the sky, eyes searching the inky black as if looking for-

Well. Shadow Milk knows who he’s looking for.

Whatever Pure Vanilla is thinking goes unannounced. After several long moments of silence he turns, leaving the courtyard to head back the way he’d come.

Shadow Milk follows him closely, slipping from shadow to shadow as he tries to catch a closer glimpse of the other’s face - yet Pure Vanilla’s mask is unmovable, expression rigid as if carved into stone since the moment he’d stepped into the courtyard. The only change comes when he re-enters the building, eyes softening as he gives the innkeep a placid smile.

“I... think I’ll stay the night.”

The room isn't shabby.

Perhaps the innkeeper just gave more attention to the places Cookies would be lodging; perhaps Pure Vanilla is just receiving the royal treatment. Both would be unsurprising, but the relative poshness of the place certainly is.

It's still rustic, still carries a lingering scent of smoke and pine in the air – but the room is freshly wallpapered, its floors layered in plush, cream-wool carpet. The bed, while certainly smaller than the ones the castle boasts, is decently sized and covered in a thick, patchwork quilt. By the window lies a small reading table and chair, furnished with a raisin-bun teapot, along with a mirrored dresser against the far wall.

It's by this dresser that Pure Vanilla sits, a borrowed brush in hand as he runs it slowly through his hair. His gaze is vacant, his movements slow – he's been lost in thoughts for *ages*, long enough for Shadow Milk to grow agonizingly bored from his perch in the shadows.

He'd expected – something. Something more than the other Cookie moving around in utter silence, more than a night of sitting around in borrowed bedclothes and absently toying with the small braids decorating golden hair.

It's all rather boring, even if it is clearly, painfully obvious by now that Pure Vanilla is upset.

Shadow Milk is a bit surprised to find himself so tickled by the sight. As much as he enjoys watching Pure Vanilla writhe in discomfort, he'd still dismissed the other's offerings of mutual contentment as nothing more than a half-baked ploy - yet here Pure Vanilla sits, acting out his sorrows for a perceived audience of none. There's a certain something to it, a sense of satisfaction from observing the quiet mannerisms of Pure Vanilla's unhappiness, or the tedium of his slow yet careless movements. His traversal through the courtyard, the constant, idle glances at the windows – he may not know the other is watching, but it almost feels like a special treat made just for Shadow Milk's own ego.

Pure Vanilla is unhappy he is gone. His furtive glances are a silent plea, an open casting call for a sign of Shadow Milk's presence.

Which is all well and good – he should be uncertain, on edge concerning Shadow Milk's decision. His laughter and smiles at the inn had been grating, a mirage of perceived confidence in the other's return. Yet here, in solitude, worry is plainly etched into his dough, quiet misery palpable as he lowers his head and lets out a long, tired sigh.

Shadow Milk preens at the sight.

When Pure Vanilla rises, Shadow Milk expects him to finish brushing out his ends; instead, the other Cookie simply tosses the brush on the counter before shuffling off towards the bed.

He sits himself down on the edge, spreading his arms before falling backwards; he bounces slightly from the impact, pushing another heavy sigh from his chest.

My, my, how dramatic. Shadow Milk's almost proud.

The shadows cast from the bedside lamp provide an easy pathway, letting Shadow Milk slither his way down until he's tucked above the headboard. From this angle he can see Pure Vanilla's eyes droop; there's a slight fluttering, a hint of resistance to the motion before they slip shut.

Well now, that won't do. Shadow Milk hasn't even made his grand entrance yet.

He picks his moment carefully, eyes scanning possible jumping-out points as options tick through his head. Eventually, he settles on the simplest choice, the tried and true – after all, it's not like a spectacle will pierce closed eyes.

Slipping out from the darkness, Shadow Milk materializes above Pure Vanilla's head, floating eye to eye opposite where the other lay. When there's no reaction, no movement save for a slow breath, Shadow Milk casually remarks:

“So what'd you get me?”

The reaction is immediate, predictable; Shadow Milk immediately snaps his head to the side, narrowly avoiding the impact from Pure Vanilla bolting upright in bed. The other immediately turns, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape as he takes in Shadow Milk's lazy smile and purposefully relaxed posture.

“Shadow-”

“Miss me?” Shadow Milk queries easily, a mocking lift to his brow.

“Y-” Pure Vanilla hesitates, as if expecting a trick question. “I wasn't... sure, if-”

“As you should be. I'm not agreeing to anything just yet.” Shadow Milk pivots in mid-air, leaning in closer as he drinks in Pure Vanilla's shock, the glimmer of surprise turned gleam of misplaced hope. “What, you think you can tie me down that easily? With *my* options? I don't see a ring on my finger.”

“I- what?” Pure Vanilla's brow wrinkles in confusion; there's an audible sniff as he subtly leans in closer, eyes scrunching for a moment before he asks: “Wait, have you been drinking?”

“Yep,” Shadow Milk replies, popping the *p* for effect.

“Oh.” Pure Vanilla blinks, renewed hesitation on his face. “Um, where did you-?”

“What can I say?” Shadow Milk replies, spreading his hands in a mock shrug. “That Black Raisin Cookie of yours isn't as stale as I thought. She's not half-bad for company once she's three glasses in.”

“Black Raisin Cookie?” Pure Vanilla’s eyes widen, head recoiling slightly in surprise. “You and Black Raisin Cookie were... *drinking* together?”

Shadow Milk cocks an eyebrow. “Jealous?”

A flicker - a fleeting, *telling* glance away before Pure Vanilla’s meeting his eyes again. “Of course not.”

Ooh. A pretty little lie, just for him.

Shadow Milk hums; he leans forward, pressing the tip of his cane to Pure Vanilla’s forehead. The other blinks, offering no resistance as Shadow Milk slowly pushes him back down onto the bed. He seems befuddled more than anything, milky eyes searching Shadow Milk’s lazy smile for answers.

“Been a while,” Shadow Milk remarks; his gaze flicks down to the Soul Jam before tilting his head in mock inquiry. “Shall we kiss and make up?”

Pure Vanilla flushes instantly; Shadow Milk cackles at the sight as the other bats the cane away. “Goodness,” Pure Vanilla grumbles, averting his eyes again. “Just how much *did* you have to drink?”

Shadow Milk just hums again, folding his arms back behind his back. His buzz, while fading, is still there; while it’s certainly not as potent as before, there remains a pleasant warmth within his jam. “Don’t complain,” he chides, leaning down; their foreheads brush, brooches now a hair’s breadth apart.

The pull is strong, this close. A drumbeat of longing, invisible hooks trying to tug him down even as Shadow Milk resists, forcing himself to drink in the sensation a moment longer. He can feel his Soul Jam’s pulse, resonating in time with Pure Vanilla’s own; the other looks half-drunk himself, his wide-eyed gaze turning hazy as Shadow Milk slowly looks him over. “You’ve caught me in a good mood,” Shadow Milk murmurs, an easy smile upon his lips. “Why not take advantage, hm?”

Hesitation; Pure Vanilla suddenly tensing beneath him, uncertainty lacing his brow.

Shadow Milk just rolls his eyes, pressing in to close the distance.

Clink.

The room melts away in a blur of color; Shadow Milk feels his own eyes slip shut, darkness swallowing his senses as he sinks into the abyss.

It’s warm, pleasantly so; he’s walking on a path of stars, each step a glowing footprint on a sea of rippling, inky black. A blue crescent moon hangs high in the sky, mirrored in the waters below – another step and he is sinking, gravity pulling him down with a guttural cry. Seawater fills his lungs; above, the moon glitters brilliantly, winking back at his dying gasps with a teasing smile.

He trudges through the sands of a burning desert, wipes his brow amidst the overgrowth of a sweltering jungle. He stands, shivering, in sugar-snow covered plains with a dark forest pressing in all around him. Something is moving near him, something that slips the corners of his vision with each turn of his head. He calls desperately to it – yet his lips do not move. No sound escapes his throat. The forest presses closer, branches scraping at his dough as he throws his arms over his face-

He is back in the abyss. There is no sound, no sight. He is alone, phantom sensations of what once had been touch crawling up his arms.

There is warmth at his back, a heaviness leaning against him. Another heartbeat, thumping in time to his own; a hand at his wrist, squeezing so tight he feels he may break. The sensation is foreign, exhilarating. Terrifying.

Something wet slides down his cheek.

The world blurs again; the visions swim together, a haze of color and blanket sound that begin dripping away from his consciousness bit by bit. Shadow Milk feels his lashes flutter, feels the pull lessening as he breathes – by the time he manages to pry his eyes open, the sensations are dulled, a strange sort of murkiness in the back of his mind.

Shadow Milk pushes himself up on his stomach, blinking away the sleep from his eyes as he absently surveys the room. It's still dark out; the bedside lamp blazes obnoxiously bright, but the shadows of the night still cloak the rest of their surroundings with a pleasant stillness. Through the curtained window, moon shines brightly overhead, a sliver of light that glints mischievously back at him.

Shadow Milk can't quite place why, but the sight of it irritates him.

His tired gaze drops to the form beside him; Pure Vanilla Cookie is still fast asleep on his back, eyes closed and head lolling to the side. His golden hair is a mess, falling all over his face as if he'd been tossing and turning. Each slow, steady breath he takes ruffles the strands covering his mouth with a soft puff of air.

How unkempt.

Shadow Milk scoots himself up, partially tucking his legs as he leans on his right arm to lazily gaze over the other. In this position, Pure Vanilla's cheek rests against Shadow Milk's thigh; his breaths warm a small patch of dough, even through Shadow Milk's immaculately tailored suit.

Perhaps it's the fading vestiges of the connection refusing to let go – perhaps it's that persistent, pleasant buzzing from one too many drinks still sloshing around in his jam. Yet Shadow Milk finds himself reaching out, absently pushing back the stray strands of hair from Pure Vanilla's face and resting his palm against the other's cheek.

His dough feels so strange to the touch. Shadow Milk presses lightly, watching it indent from the motion – it's familiar, yet so different to his own. Shadow Milk is baked to last, his dough

hardened to weather time and blade immemorial. Clearly the Witches felt they'd made him *too* well, because his replacement feels nothing like that. Pure Vanilla is soft, malleable.

Squishy.

Shadow Milk pokes and prods at the other's face, absentmindedly watching the dough squash and stretch beneath his touch. His not-so-tender ministrations begin to rouse the other; there's a groan, a fluttering of lashes before Pure Vanilla's eyes flicker open. His gaze is hazy and vacant, drifting across the ceiling as he offers several slow blinks – before his eyes land on Shadow Milk's own, recognition visibly dawning in their depths.

Pure Vanilla gazes blankly at him; Shadow Milk gazes back. A beat of silence, the entire world narrowed down to the warmth of his hand resting against Pure Vanilla's cheek and the other's wide, searching gaze.

Shadow Milk pinches – hard. “Squish.”

A sharp wince; Pure Vanilla's eyes scrunch up. “Ow.” He doesn't withdraw, doesn't bat at Shadow Milk's hand. He merely tilts his head as if trying to lean away – yet only serving to push his face further into Shadow Milk's thigh.

A grin, sharp and wicked as Shadow Milk's hand follows, nudging at the dough just below the other's eye. “Squash.”

Pure Vanilla groans; he turns his head in full, burying his face against Shadow Milk's leg. “Stop.”

Shadow Milk's hand traces upwards, grasping upon a loose strand of golden hair before giving it a quick tug. “Yoink.”

A sigh, low and heavy; Pure Vanilla rolls his head back slightly, a single eye squinting upwards. “Having fun?”

“Maybe.” Shadow Milk keeps idly tugging on the other's locks, enjoying the tiny wince he earns from time to time. “Maybe not.”

Pure Vanilla fixes him with an unimpressed look. “You're still drunk.”

“Maybe,” Shadow Milk repeats. He's not really sure what he is; his initial tipsiness has long since faded away, but their connection had – reinvigorated it, perhaps? He feels oddly pleasant, a sort of giddy, mischievous delight tiptoeing its way through his dough.

Whatever, he feels nice. He's not going to overthink it.

Pure Vanilla exhales slowly, reburying his face in Shadow Milk's leg as he scrunches up, settling into the bed as if getting ready to sleep. “Are you going to poke me all night?”

“You should be so lucky.” Shadow Milk flicks the side of the other's chin. “Besides, be more grateful, hm? I gave you what you wanted.” Pure Vanilla lifts his head up again, gaze

searching; Shadow Milk grins at him, all teeth. “Moi. Me and my glorious, unparalleled presence. Aren’t we so, *so* pleased? I know you missed me.”

Pure Vanilla lowers his head back down, eyes closing again. “Yes.”

“Mm?” Shadow Milk leans in, his own hair falling over his shoulders from the movement. “Yes what?”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla sighs, “I missed you.”

Shadow Milk drags a stray lock of golden hair out of place. “Which is a ridiculous sentiment, by the way.”

“May I go back to sleep now?”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong.” Shadow Milk twirls the hair back and forth, watching it slip from his palm. “I thought you were just deluding yourself like usual. And, you know, you still are. But as the handsomest, cleverest, and most sophisticated Cookie in all the land, I will admit I see your point. Can I truly blame a foolish little thing like you for pining?”

Pure Vanilla says nothing; his eyes are closed, openly trying to ignore him.

Shadow Milk tugs on the other’s hair, hard – Pure Vanilla winces, cracking open a reluctant eye. “Y’know,” Shadow Milk remarks easily, “you really are just the silliest. Silly Vanilly.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes open in full.

“See,” Shadow Milk continues, toying with the hem of Pure Vanilla’s collar, “I already *gave* you what you wanted. More than that, really – everything you could possibly want! An entire, perfect world, carved out for just the two of us. Forever! But you, well...” Shadow Milk taps Pure Vanilla’s forehead. “You.” *Tap*. “Said.” *Tap*. “No.”

Pure Vanilla shifts, trying to rise; Shadow Milk’s hand drops, pushing down on the other’s chest to force him still.

“It’s *so* funny, don’t you think?” Shadow Milk leans over, taking Pure Vanilla’s face in his hands. They’re only inches apart now; Pure Vanilla’s gaze is uneasy, uncertain as Shadow Milk stares him down. “Guess that cheesy, greedy little Cookie friend of yours is rubbing off on you. You want to remain at my side, but already shot down my oh-so generous offer once. So, are you having second thoughts?”

“It wasn’t perfect.”

Shadow Milk’s brow cocks. “What’s that?”

Pure Vanilla holds his gaze; his eyes have softened, something small and sad within their depths. “The world you made, it wasn’t perfect. He wouldn’t have stayed.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow; his grip on Pure Vanilla’s face tightens. “And why would *he* have any say in it?”

A long moment of silence passes between them; Pure Vanilla, avoiding his gaze, while Shadow Milk holds him down and pins him with his own.

Finally, Pure Vanilla slowly, carefully lifts a hand. Shadow Milk follows its movements, watches its careful ascent until it pauses, hovering over Shadow Milk's Soul Jam. Pure Vanilla's palm flattens, gently brushing against the cold metal –

The world twists; Shadow Milk tenses as the room spins out from under him in a blur of color, darkness twisting around writhing strands of light as his vision swims.

The moon winks back at him – no. Not the moon.

A giant eye, his eyes, blinking in the night sky. The feeling of cold wind in his robes, fluttering his sleeves in the breeze. Darkness, perpetual midnight all around him – staring out from the top of the spire on the cusp of the ledge, barely feeling the staff grasped tightly in his hand.

The sound of his own voice from behind, chattering away as he stands in silence.

His gaze slowly slides down, down past the tower's ledge. Down where there is nothing but emptiness and silence, nothing but a plummet so steep it would shatter him before he hit the ground.

There's a laugh behind him, a mocking sing-song inquiry that is swallowed by the howling wind. His mind is silent, screaming, a roaring cacophony of emptiness and nauseating dread.

He takes another step, and his foot meets air.

The world twists again; Shadow Milk gasps as he's thrown out of the vision, as dull wooden walls and flickering candlelight swim back into view. He recoils, hands grasping wildly at his brooch – he snaps his cold, furious gaze back down to Pure Vanilla, who stares back with that same, quiet sadness.

“He wouldn't have stayed.”

That phrase – that damned phrase, so soft on Pure Vanilla's lips, echoes violently in Shadow Milk's ears. His lips twist in a snarl as he lunges, hands clenching tight around Pure Vanilla's wrists as he pins the other to the bed. “So *what?*” he sneers; his heart is still racing, the vestiges of the vision still leaving him swallowing breath. “You think that would have changed **anything**? *Nothing* leaves my Spire, not even your sad, pathetic little *soul*. Crumble away as many times as you want – I'll put you back together **myself**.”

Pure Vanilla doesn't fight him, doesn't resist as Shadow Milk looms dangerously over him. He simply watches, head cocked to the side as he traces his eyes over Shadow Milk's sneer – considering. Appraising. Finally, his lips part as he murmurs:

“So let me.”

A blink. “What?”

“Let me stay with you.”

Shadow Milk’s grip slackens; he scans Pure Vanilla’s steady gaze, his own disbelieving.

“If you would do all that...” Pure Vanilla shifts, lolling his head to the other side. “If you would do everything in your power to keep me, forever – why now will you not allow me to remain by your side?”

Another beat of silence; Shadow Milk stares as Pure Vanilla slips from his grasp, the other’s hands rising up to caress his face. Pure Vanilla’s expression is disturbingly tender, softness and sadness in equal tandem as he lays beneath him.

It’s dizzying in its surrealness.

“What are you talking about?” Shadow Milk’s voice sounds foreign in his ears. “What’s wrong with you?”

Pure Vanilla hums; a non-answer.

“You’ve got a sick sense of humor.” Shadow Milk wants to pull away – his mind is screaming for it – but something about the sheer strangeness, the unnerving gentleness in Pure Vanilla’s touch keeps him still. “You’re going to show me *that*, then ask to stay? You wanted to-”

The words stick in his throat; he feels wrong, raw all over. He hadn’t even known Pure Vanilla could show him – memories? What-ifs? Possessing a knowledge of their link even he’d lacked, displaying it so casually with a simple touch - and now the other holds him like fledgling, hands slowly tracing over his cheeks.

Shadow Milk feels ill.

“I did,” Pure Vanilla affirms, voice steady as his hands come to rest on Shadow Milk’s shoulders. “But Truthless Recluse is only one part of me. Your actions brought him to my surface, but you never created him. My doubts, my regrets and resentments – even my own, fleeting wish for oblivion. Everything I had buried for the sake of others, they consumed me. They were all he was, all he could be. He hated you. You could never have been happy with him.”

“I was.” The words are out before Shadow Milk can stop them. “I was happy with him. You were perfect.”

Pure Vanilla’s lips twitch into a small smile; the hands on Shadow Milk’s shoulders give a gentle squeeze. “I wasn’t. If you must spend eternity with another, let it be one who holds you in affection. Perhaps I will not convince you of that tonight, and perhaps you will never accept me in his place - but I promise you that Truthless Recluse will never return to your side, nor accept you at his.”

Shadow Milk tries to scowl; he’s not sure of his own expression, something strange twisting in his chest. “You don’t know that.”

“I do.” Pure Vanilla’s moving to sit up properly now; a gentle push on Shadow Milk’s shoulders, maneuvering the other to the side as Pure Vanilla scoots to the edge of the bed. “Unfortunately for you, my friend, your actions have given me perspective. Without you, I may never have confronted the feelings I had buried and seen the true worth of that which outweighs my doubts. I will not deny my feelings anymore – which is precisely why I will also never step foot off that ledge.”

“So what?” Shadow Milk’s voice rings hollow, his eyes narrowing to slits. “Is that what I am to you? Perspective? A little warning bell, ringing in your ear?”

“No,” Pure Vanilla counters easily. “You are Shadow Milk Cookie. You do not need to be anything else.”

Unsatisfactory.

“Why do you want me around?” The question is snapped through gritted teeth; Shadow Milk floats off the bed, putting ample space between them as he rises. “Why do you keep acting like we’re friends? I’m not nice to you.”

“You’re not,” Pure Vanilla affirms. “It’s a bit troublesome at times.”

Shadow Milk throws his arms up in frustration. “See! This! This is what I’m talking about! What is *wrong* with you? Why on Earthbread are you *so* insistent about wanting to stay by *my* side?”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “Are you not the handsomest, cleverest, and most sophisticated Cookie in all the land?”

A scowl – a real one this time. “That’s not an answer.”

“No, and I’m not going to give you one.” Pure Vanilla gets to his feet, openly ignoring the affronted gawk Shadow Milk’s sending his way. “I don’t think it’ll do either of us any good right now. But, seeing as you are extremely clever, I think it’s something you’ll figure out on your own in time.”

Shadow Milk Cookie huffs. “Giving me a lot of answers to go find on my own, hm?”

“Call it enrichment.” Pure Vanilla Cookie has crossed the room, is now actively rummaging around in the pockets of his discarded robes. “Now, before I forget - do you want your gift? I did promise you one.”

Ah. In all the talking and *feelings*, Shadow Milk had nearly forgotten the most important thing of all – material goods offered to his glory.

Shadow Milk twirls his staff thrice, irritation and confusion still muddling up his mood – but he is not above being bribed. “I doubt it’s any good.”

“I have every confidence you’ll like it.”

A scoff; Shadow Milk perks a brow in disbelief. “I have very refined taste, you know. I’m not easy to please.”

“Don’t I know it.” Pure Vanilla finally pulls his hand from the pockets to produce a gift box, holding it out in his palm. “Here.”

Shadow Milk looks it over, unimpressed. “It’s a little small.”

“So are you. I find that doesn’t stop you from making an impression.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes; he floats down, snatching the box from Pure Vanilla’s outstretched hand. As he brings it up to his face to inspect it, he finds it’s tied neatly with a bright yellow bow and wrapped in waffle-cone patterned paper.

Of course it’s waffle-cone. Everything around here is waffle-cone.

Pure Vanilla’s watching him expectantly, so Shadow Milk heaves a sigh, tugging on the ribbon until the box unfolds in his hands. The contents drop into his open palm; Shadow Milk leans in close, squinting at it. It’s-

Him.

A small, wooden replica of him – or more precisely, the flat of his face grinning ear-to-ear. The likeness is striking; they’ve even gotten the whites of his lashes right. Shadow Milk turns it over in his hand; there’s a scribbled artist’s signature on the back along with a winky face.

“Your banners have made quite the splash in the art community.” Pure Vanilla’s already crossed back over, lowering himself to sit on the bed. “Jacaranda Cookie was especially taken in. She’s got keychains of you, too; apparently, they’re selling quite well.”

Shadow Milk lowers his gaze down to the other, eyes narrowing. “You tricked me.”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, smile teasing. “Did I?”

“Yes. You knew perfectly well I was going to insult whatever you gave me.”

A hum. “I did.”

“You got me the one thing-” Shadow Milk holds the trinket aloft. “The *one thing* I couldn’t make fun of. How could you? Have you no heart? How am I meant to mock my own, perfect face?”

“That’s true,” Pure Vanilla remarks, eyes crinkling with mirth. “After all, I’ve been told it’s a very handsome face.”

Shadow Milk resists the urge to fling the tchotchke right into Pure Vanilla’s forehead.

Barely.

“Anyways.” Pure Vanilla’s pulling up the covers, tucking himself in as he settles down against the pillows. “I’m glad you like it, but I really would like to get some sleep. I’ll be heading back up to the castle tomorrow; you are welcome to join me, if you wish.” He reaches for the bedside lamp, pausing with his hand around the chain. “Are you staying?”

Shadow Milk scoffs, folding his arms across his chest. “Hah! Told you already, Dollface – I’m not committing to anything. Go find *that* answer yourself.”

“I meant,” Pure Vanilla replies mildly, “in the room.”

Oh.

“Hard pass.” Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his head with a casual stretch. “The darkness on the roof is much comfier, and has a whole lot less of *you* in it. Besides, from what I hear, you’re quite the snorer.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes, already half-drooping, suddenly snap open. “I don’t snore.”

Shadow Milk grins. “Nilly, we already had our little bedtime romp for the night. You don’t have to keep wooing me over with pretty little lies.”

There’s a squint, a flicker of dissatisfaction before Pure Vanilla grumbles: “Stay away from Black Raisin Cookie.” He tugs on the lamp’s chain; the room is swallowed in darkness as Shadow Milk cackles to himself.

He’ll have to make a note to see her again.

Pure Vanilla’s fully settled in now; Shadow Milk’s bright eyes can pick out the other’s face from across the room, how his eyes flutter shut, how he nudges his face deeper into the pillows. It’s almost comical how small Pure Vanilla makes himself look when he’s all tucked in - like a baby bird, curled in its nest.

Shadow Milk wants to pinch him again.

The urge is resisted – once again, barely. Instead the shadows call to him, pulling his form along as Shadow Milk melds back into pleasant darkness. He slides along the rafters, slipping through cracks in the wooden beams until he can reemerge on the rooftop, form solidifying with his hands behind his back.

The night air is bracing, a cold breeze ruffling his hair as Shadow Milk tilts his gaze skywards. The moon still hangs high above - still cloaked in its blanket of stars, still a beacon of light that gleams brightly in defiance of his perfect darkness. She winks at him, teasing; Shadow Milk ignores it, averting his gaze with a scoff. Yet even as Shadow Milk sighs, leaning back and letting his eyes slip shut, a singular, reluctant thought lingers in his mind.

She wouldn’t look half-bad in blue.

Chapter 9

Shadow Milk doesn't return to the castle right away.

While Pure Vanilla's attempt at a command had long been discarded, it isn't ire that keeps Shadow Milk away. When they'd spoken the next morning, Pure Vanilla had, by all accounts, accepted Shadow Milk's refusal to return with grace – he had simply sipped at his breakfast tea, no show of resistance. It had only been the subtle tightening of his shoulders that had left Shadow Milk, begrudgingly, softening his denial to a 'not yet'; the smile he'd received in return had felt genuine.

After that Pure Vanilla had left, returning home with a soft farewell lingering in the air while Shadow Milk -

Shadow Milk has gone exploring.

There's a curiosity, an idle intrigue in drifting through the shadows of the kingdom as he passes through lands he's not touched in millennia. He spends his days simply observing, watching Cookies go about their daily routine. It's all a bit boring, but it's still new, still more than just castle walls or the ceaseless void of a tree's trunk. They're simple Cookies, living simple lives, little more than bit players on his grand stage – yet strangely content with their lot in life.

Deluded with the sweet little lie that their spectacularly fleeting lives have purpose or meaning.

The younger Cookies carry an unsettling sort of mystique to them; words Shadow Milk has never heard in his life are traded back and forth with alarming rapidity. He knows he's been away a while but their fashion, their mannerisms – even the way they style their hair is so bizarre to him.

Such an odd, perverse fascination with the eighteenth letter of the Grecookian alphabet. Some sort of scholarly inside-joke?

The days Shadow Milk spends in the shadows, watching the world he once knew crawl by; the nights he spends beneath the stars. There's an odd peacefulness to the skies above the Vanilla Kingdom, a tranquility barely disturbed by even the coldest gust of wind. High above the treetops, Shadow Milk will find himself lounging on his back in mid-air, arms behind his head as he watches the stars slowly drift through space.

He hadn't had a good view of the sky from his prison within the tree. The small cracks in its wood, the fleeting glimpses through silver chains had been little more than hazy outlines of far-away Faerie Cookies and their detestable, shining forest. No one had come close enough to truly see or hear in full – no one had dared to.

The only face he remembers clearly is Elder Faerie Cookie's cold, remorseless stare - and that is a memory better left forgotten.

Three moons rise and set as Shadow Milk wanders the land. There's no aim to his journey, no set course he's on. Each night he feels the tug of his Soul Jam calling him back; each night he ignores it, drinking in crisp air and free, open skies.

It's strange, looking back – he's never really taken in the world like this, not after his escape from confinement. The miserable little Faerie Cookies, rebuilding his spire, reclaiming his physical form – all had taken precedence, a script to stick to as he pulled the strings of his puppets along.

Shadow Milk Cookie has never been one for prolonged quiet, but the taste of complete freedom melts sweetly on his tongue.

Almost complete, anyway.

By the fourth night, the pull is nigh irresistible; Shadow Milk finds his head unconsciously turning again and again towards the castle's distant silhouette. The restlessness is back, a persistent itch beneath his dough. Shadow Milk toys with his own endurance, pretending it's nothing more than a passing urge – even as he drifts closer and closer to the Vanilla Kingdom's walls.

When he reaches the castle's looming towers, the pulse is a drumbeat in his ears. It burns beneath his dough, dances along the lines of his jam in electric sparks.

There is only muted surprise to find Pure Vanilla waiting out on his balcony, staring up into the sky.

Their eyes lock the moment Shadow Milk melds into view; a beat of silence, each gaze searching the other as the connection thrums in a deafening song. Pure Vanilla spreads his arms wide in a beckoning embrace, the softest of smiles upon his lips.

Shadow Milk's ego demands hesitation, refusal, a greater show of submission.

His body is already wrapped in the other's arms.

Clink.

By the time Shadow Milk's consciousness finally filters back in, it's to the feeling of cold stone floors against his hips and a peculiar warmth on his cheek. They're still on the balcony – hadn't even made it inside, how humiliating – with Pure Vanilla on his back and Shadow Milk half-draped atop him, arms folded and cheek resting against the other's chest. Dimly, Shadow Milk notes there's a gentle hand stroking through his hair; he flicks his groggy gaze up, finds Pure Vanilla's hazy eyes looking back.

Judging by the other's vacant expression, Pure Vanilla feels just as blissed out as he does.

Perhaps four days had been pushing it.

The hand in Shadow Milk's hair trails downward, coming to rest at the nape of his neck. Pure Vanilla's watching him through half-lidded eyes, his head lolling slightly to the side. There's

a contented sigh, a low exhale that Shadow Milk can feel with the rise and fall of the other's chest.

Pure Vanilla's dough is warm against his cheek.

"Did you have fun?"

An inane question, and one Shadow Milk is far too disoriented to answer. He offers a half-grunt in reply; the hand on his neck resumes its ministrations, rubbing small circles against his nape.

"I missed you."

Again, not something worth replying to. Another grunt gets him a gentle squeeze on his shoulder; Shadow Milk buries his face deeper into the other's chest. He doesn't care, doesn't care that it's Pure Vanilla he's resting against, doesn't care that it's just the afterglow of their connection making him feel half-melted into the floor. He just wants to lie there forever, letting the cold night air soothe the fevered feeling in his jam.

There's gentle pat on his back. "Come on. Let's go inside."

Shadow Milk groans loudly in open protest; all he gets for his troubles is a soft laugh and a gentle squeeze.

He doesn't really focus on much after that; there's some shuffling of limbs, some dragging and lifting as he slumps limply, petulantly in the other's arms. He is gradually, carefully manhandled over to the bed – something Shadow Milk only hazily takes notice of when there's sheets being tucked up to his chin. He grumbles, still protesting the treatment as the covers lift and Pure Vanilla settles in next to him.

"Yes, yes." An amused chuckle, the feeling of Pure Vanilla's hand brushes through his hair. "Go back to sleep."

Shadow Milk's eyes flutter, the instinctive pull to disobey sparking briefly before being smothered by his own fatigue.

Four days really *had* been pushing it.

"Oh," Pure Vanilla remarks and why, why is he *still* talking? "I should mention – the staff has returned."

If Shadow Milk had the energy to roll his eyes, he would. Why is this something Pure Vanilla thinks he cares about?

Shadow Milk turns on his side, putting his back to the other; his eyes slip shut in full as pleasant darkness overtakes his senses. There's a flicker of – something, the weight in the bed shifting slightly, the gentlest brush of touch to his cheek that registers before Shadow Milk's consciousness slips away in full. It had almost felt like -

No.

He must have imagined it.

--

Of all the ways Shadow Milk had expected to start his next day, the slamming of doors and three high-pitched voices startling him to wakefulness is not one of them. He all but bolts upright in bed, vision glazed and disoriented; a series of rapid blinks and a sharp shake of his head follows in an attempt to clear it. He rubs at his eyes, turning his head towards the source of the noise-

To find three identically sized, identically shaped Cookies dragging Pure Vanilla Cookie out of the bed.

They're – small. Smaller than Cuccidati Cookie, all dressed in the same frilled smock, all with black hair done up in matching twin ponytails. They look – no, *must* be triplets, with not a scrap of difference between them, save for a single, alternating streak of color in each of their bangs.

White. Brown. Pink.

“Come on, up, up!” The one with pink in her hair is clapping her hands sharply in front of Pure Vanilla’s face. “Sir, you’ve got a busy day! No lollygagging!”

Pure Vanilla lets out a soft murmur of his own, completely unintelligible. The other two give a sharp tug, hauling him out of the bed in full – Shadow Milk sits there, staring blankly as the three usher the man over to the mirrored dresser. They tug him down, forcing him to sit – the one with the brown streak picks up the brush, immediately getting to work while the one with white hurries over to the wardrobe and flings it open.

“Come on, let’s keep it moving!” The pink one’s bustling around Pure Vanilla in circles, tugging at the sleeves of his bedclothes. “Off! Nilla, hurry up with his robes!”

“Here.” The other Cookie – Nilla? – returns with a fresh bundle of clothes in her arms, all neatly stacked and pressed. “Choca, have you seen his crown?”

“Table.” The one with the brown in her hair is still dutifully brushing through Pure Vanilla’s flowing locks, tutting as she does. “Goodness, so many tangles. This was so much easier before.”

“Thanks. Fresa-”

“Yes, yes. Go grab his tea.” The pink – Fresa, Shadow Milk’s getting the hang of this – dismisses her sister with a sharp wave of her hand. “He’ll be useless all day without it.” She then reaches up, snagging her hands around Pure Vanilla’s collar, yanking it down-

Shadow Milk's mouth drops, quickly averting his eyes as Pure Vanilla is disrobed right in front of him.

There's more chattering, more back and forths that Shadow Milk tunes out as he dutifully stares at the ceiling. By the time he dares to glance back again, Pure Vanilla is fully dressed; he even has a steaming cup of tea in hand that he languidly sips at as the three usher him towards the door. "Come on!" Fresa's got him by the hand, tugging him forward as her sisters push at his back. "You're already seven minutes late. Stop dawdling!"

Pure Vanilla's eyes are still closed, the scarcest of fluttering as he glances backwards and offers Shadow Milk a small, sleepy smile – before he's abruptly shoved through the doorway and out of sight.

Shadow Milk continues to stare, disbelief swirling in his mind as the other two Cookies sweep from the room – until the white-haired one, Nilla, stops in her tracks. She swivels, meeting Shadow Milk's surprised stare head-on as she openly looks him up and down with a considering gaze.

Her brow then perks, giving Shadow Milk the most blatantly judgmental look he's ever seen in his life.

Then she turns on her heels, swiftly shutting the door behind her and leaving Shadow Milk alone and utterly baffled in the now-silent room.

Perhaps he should have just stayed in the forest.

--

Turns out the staff returning *is* something Shadow Milk cares about.

A lot.

The castle, once a maze of empty, echoing corridors, is now bursting with life. Shadow Milk's favorite shadowy nooks are gone, obliterated by curtains being thrown wide and Cookies flitting to and fro mopping, decorating, dusting. Everywhere he turns there is a new set of eyes on him, new faces that either regard him with idle wonder or quickly avert when he snaps his own baleful gaze to them. They curtsy, they bow, they hurriedly duck out of his way as he floats through the hallways with increasing agitation.

Sure, he knew Pure Vanilla's castle would house *some* servants – but isn't this a little too much for an *abdicated* king?

"It's not really for me." Shadow Milk had found Pure Vanilla several hours later in his study, bent over his paperwork with that same mug of tea in hand. "There's a lot of hosting that goes on here. Governors and mayors from different provinces, townsfolk, whomever. They

hold all sorts of political conferences almost daily. I think the location helps increase the significance of the meetings in their eyes. I've been told there's a sign-up sheet somewhere."

"Isn't this your *house*?"

"I don't mind." Pure Vanilla shrugs one shoulder, eyes still glued to his papers. "I only need the one room."

"Hm." Shadow Milk's gaze drops to the other's mug; the tea inside looks ice-cold, the dregs already beginning to solidify. "Have you even eaten anything today?"

Pure Vanilla blinks, looking up. "What?"

"I *said*," Shadow Milk sneers, "I would appreciate a *little* more warning next time. I deserve better than to have three little hellions scampering about the moment I open my big, beautiful eyes. What, you get them in a three-for-one mini-pack special?"

"The Neapolitan sisters?" Pure Vanilla cocks his head, smiling. "They were all baked from the same cut of dough; not a lot of it left over to make all three, so they say. Don't let their size fool you, though. They're quite skilled. I rely on them heavily."

"So I saw." Shadow Milk perks a brow. "They undressed you."

"I'm a bit slow in the mornings." Pure Vanilla takes another sip of his ice-cold tea. "They're just doing their job. It's no different than a doctor's office."

"Bit lazy, are we?"

"Perhaps," Pure Vanilla hums back.

Shadow Milk twirls his cane; he floats in circles, twisting in the air above Pure Vanilla's head. "Bad luck for you, though. I'm sure it's *alllll* over the castle by now."

"Hm?" Pure Vanilla glances up at him. "What is?"

"Those three seeing another Cookie in your bed." Shadow Milk grins ear to ear, fanning himself with a roll of his eyes. "How scandalous for their once- sorry, *never* great king."

"Doubtful." Pure Vanilla returns his gaze to the paper, narrowly missing Shadow Milk's scowl. "The sisters are discreet. It's never been an issue before."

Shadow Milk scoffs – then pauses, as Pure Vanilla's words replay in his mind. "Wait, what?"

"Hm?"

"What do you mean, before?" Shadow Milk pivots in the air, hovering face to face with the other. "What, like they've caught *other* Cookies in your bed?"

Pure Vanilla lifts his gaze for a fraction of a second; he perks his brow, then immediately lowers his head back to his work.

Shadow Milk gasps, a hand flying to his chest. “No! Oh, you’ve got to be pulling my leg!”

“I didn’t say anything,” Pure Vanilla replies mildly.

“To think a single Cookie could find your presence that tolerable without a chain around their soul.” Shadow Milk flips over in the air, folding his legs beneath him. “Come on, you gotta tell me. How many’s it been? One? Two?”

Pure Vanilla lifts his mug, taking a slow sip of his tea.

“Come on.” Shadow Milk floats forward, tapping the other’s forehead with his cane. “Tell me, tell me! You know I can’t resist some juicy bits of gossip. It’s so rare that you’re actually *interesting*.”

“I would think,” Pure Vanilla remarks, setting his cup back on the desk, “that the most sophisticated Cookie in all the lands would know it’s improper to kiss and tell.”

“So there *was* kissing and telling!” Shadow Milk ducks his head, grinning ear to ear as he leans in to block Pure Vanilla’s view. “My, my, my! Who knew you had it in you?”

“You already knew that I have descendants.” Pure Vanilla’s expression remains annoyingly neutral, a picture of placid calm as he meets Shadow Milk’s gaze. “And that’s all I’ll say on the matter.”

Shadow Milk sticks out his tongue; Pure Vanilla lifts his quill, tapping the protruding appendage with its tip. As Shadow Milk rears back and sputters, Pure Vanilla continues: “I’d like to connect with you again tonight.”

A scowl as Shadow Milk wipes at his tongue. “Huh? Why?”

“You were gone quite a while.” Pure Vanilla’s quill has lowered back to the page, scratching out his signature on a series of documents. “It was... more intense, than usual. If you’re planning on leaving again, I’d like to stabilize our bond before you go.”

Shadow Milk scoffs. “Who said I’m leaving?”

“Who said you’re staying?”

A beat of silence; Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow as Pure Vanilla keeps his gaze lowered, scribbling across his pages. “Trying to get rid of me?” he challenges.

Pure Vanilla dabs his quill back in the ink. “Not at all. I told you that I’d missed you.”

Shadow Milk scoffs again, shrugging a careless shoulder. He knows what this is – a trap. A sneaky little way of Pure Vanilla scouting out his intentions. “Nice try.”

“Is it?”

Gods, he’s annoying.

“I’ll go wherever I want.” Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his head, stretching out his lower back. “That’s all you’ll get from me. Maybe I’m going, maybe I’m staying.”

Pure Vanilla hums to himself. “Then my request remains unchanged.”

“Huh?”

Pure Vanilla sets his papers down, folding his hands together as he looks at Shadow Milk straight-on. “I’d like to connect with you again tonight.”

Shadow Milk stares back at him; there’s a strange twisting in his chest, a warped smile working its way onto his face as he subtly averts his eyes. “*Sheesh!* Gotten bold, have we? I know I’m a catch, but aren’t you being a bit needy?”

“I’ve heard,” Pure Vanilla replies, pushing himself up from his desk, “that it’s better to ask for things directly. It is a habit I have long neglected throughout my life, to the continued detriment of myself and others.”

“So, what?” Shadow Milk twirls his cane, perking a brow. “You’re gonna go around just asking for every stupid little thing you want now?”

“Not at all. I’m still quite terrible at it.” Pure Vanilla picks up his staff, raising his gaze with a smile. “But I’m also finding that when it comes to you, being direct is the only path forward.”

Shadow Milk scowls. “And if I still say no?”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head with a look of polite incredulity.

A sigh; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. *My choice*. You’ve made that obnoxiously clear, you know that?”

“Good. I’d hoped to.” Pure Vanilla’s staff taps audibly on the floor as he crosses the room. “I have a meeting in a few minutes I’ve been asked to sit in on that’ll likely last the rest of the day. You’re welcome to join me later in the evening when I tend to the sheep, if you’d like.”

“Oh, a sheep day? Wonderful.” Shadow Milk scrunches his face in disgust. “Can’t *wait* for you to get the scent of dung all over my Soul Jam again.”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “So that’s a yes to the connection tonight?”

Crap. Another trap.

Shadow Milk turns away, scoffing audibly for effect. “Eh, who knows? It’s no fun if I can’t keep you guessing.”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla remarks, “either way, I’ll return to my room in the evening. Should you care to join me, I’d be more than happy to have dinner sent up for the pair of us.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk turns back around, one hand on his hip. “What’s in it for me?”

“We could play a game. I’d like a rematch at chess, if you’re willing.”

Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest. “And what do I get when I win?”

Pure Vanilla smiles. “You’ll have to come and see.” A pause, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “After all, it’s no fun if I can’t keep you guessing.”

And with that Pure Vanilla is sweeping from the room, the echoing taps of his staff slowly fading down the corridor. Shadow Milk scowls at the place where the other had stood, fresh irritation prickling through his jam. He glances backward; a swift flick of his cane summons a burst of wind, sending neatly-stacked piles of paperwork scattering to the floor.

Better.

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The rest of the afternoon passes slowly.

There’s far too many Cookies about for Shadow Milk’s taste, too many servants and dignitaries and alarmingly bushy mustaches bristling back and forth everywhere he turns. The slim shadows along the ceilings of brightly lit halls make for poor vantage points; there’s hardly any fun in twisting carpets out from underfoot if Shadow Milk has to peer and squint to glimpse their gasps of shock. He reverses gravity a few times – always a crowd pleaser – but even that loses its charm after watching what feels like the hundredth squawking dignitary flail about in the air.

He snags an apple from the kitchen, leaving behind the startled shrieks of the workers as their spaghetti rears up and roars, and slips from crack to crack through the upper echelons of the castle. A few bites of his apple, a considering hum as he drifts through the gentle black. With little else left to do, the lingering proposal of crushing Pure Vanilla at yet another game of chess does hold some small amount of appeal –

Not that he’ll be telling the other that.

When Shadow Milk resurfaces within the other’s room, it’s to an empty chamber. A quick glance outside confirms that the sun is well on its way past the horizon; if Pure Vanilla had intended to return by evening, he’s well on his way to the cusp of night. Unfortunately, his lack of presence led to one unfortunate conclusion –

He’s still with the sheep.

Gross.

As Shadow Milk begrudgingly drifts towards the open window, a stray breeze wafts past his face, fluttering the curtains and the papers strewn across Pure Vanilla’s desk. Shadow Milk’s gaze drifts to the latter – a dull spark of curiosity flickers in his chest. There’s likely to be little of interest among the letters, just tedious documents and proposals for the other to scribble through. Though, on the off-chance there was even a scrap of something more-

Well. It's not like Pure Vanilla's here to stop him.

Shadow Milk floats over to the desk; a flick of his cane and the papers spring up, circling around his head as his eyes scan sharply over the letterheads. A request for a new bridge, an engagement announcement, some drivel about road repair – nothing of interest, all about as boring as expected. Shadow Milk glances over a few more letters, raising his cane in preparation to discard them – when a blackened wax seal catches his eye.

The symbol of the Dark Cacao Kingdom stares back at him.

Shadow Milk snatches the envelope from mid-air; the rest of the papers tumble to the floor as Shadow Milk deftly tears through the seal, dropping the letter into his open palm. A hasty unfolding, a wicked grin as Shadow Milk yanks the paper towards his face –

It's four sentences long.

The grin fades almost immediately, replaced by a disbelieving scowl as Shadow Milk scans the letter thrice. He'd known Dark Cacao Cookie was curt, sure – his second-least favorite of Pure Vanilla's merry band of fools – but this was...

Nothing.

Nothing of any substance, no secrets or whispers of anger to fan. It's a blunt greeting, the briefest synopsis of the Dark Cacao Kingdom's current affairs, and a signature. Seriously, just a signature. Not a thinking of you, not a farewell, just a simple signature and three-fourths of the rest of the page left blank.

Shadow Milk's eyes threaten to roll fully back in his head.

Still, after a moment of frustrated steaming, a begrudging thought occurs. Even if Dark Cacao Cookie is about as interesting as a wooden board, Shadow Milk can still use the letter to his advantage. A flick of his wrist and a cerulean quill materializes in his hand; he puts the tip to paper, tongue protruding slightly as he narrows his eyes in concentration.

A few crass remarks here... a declaration of war there... finishing it all off with a nice little paragraph about ceding the kingdom to Shadow Milk Cookie. He signs his own name, adding a little doodle of his winking face to the bottom before folding the letter into a new envelope and snatching a stamp from the desk to smack to the top. Shadow Milk hums happily to himself as he slips the letter right into the middle of Pure Vanilla's *Send* pile, dusting off his hands as he floats backwards and grins.

There. That should spice up their next round of correspondence nicely.

His mischief finished, Shadow Milk steps out from the window, soaring through the air as he makes his way down to the stables. The evening air is pleasantly cool on his face, a brisk reprieve from stale castle air. Even with the plush comforts of his ivory tower, he's finding he appreciates the sight of the sky more and more with each passing day.

While the trip itself isn't terribly long, the first vestiges of night have firmly settled over the horizon by the time Shadow Milk alights in the pasture. The sheep are milling about; some try to sniff at his heels as he glides over them, one tries to nip at his shoe. Yet among all of them and their putrid scent, there's a distinct lack of Pure Vanilla anywhere to be seen.

There is, however, a single lamp lit at the far end of the stables - which is precisely where Shadow Milk heads next.

The sight that greets him is somehow decidedly unsurprising.

A large, golden haystack is heaped in the corner of the barn; slumped against it is Pure Vanilla himself, half-curved into a ball and clutching his staff with eyes fluttered shut. There's a small lamb curled at his feet, dozing beside its master - Shadow Milk has to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

How picturesque.

As amusing as it is to see the once-king slumbering in the hay, Shadow Milk isn't a fan of standing around near sheep dung all night. He drifts forward, reaching out to try and jostle the other's shoulder -

A whimper cuts through the quiet.

It's so soft, so strangled that Shadow Milk doesn't register it for a moment; his hand stills, gaze flicking upwards in confusion to Pure Vanilla's face.

There's a visible strain, a tight furrowing of Pure Vanilla's brow. His body is fully tensed, wracked by a sharp shudder that seems almost reflexive as Shadow Milk stares incredulously at him. Pure Vanilla's hands tighten around his staff; his head jerks with some aborted motion as if trying to unconsciously dislodge something from his face.

Another slow, full-body shudder and Shadow Milk blinks in wonder - before a small, amused smile twitches at the corner of his mouth.

The great and noble Pure Vanilla Cookie is having a bad dream.

Shadow Milk's smile deepens as he leans in, prodding at the other's shoulder with a snort. "Hey," he whispers, all grins. "Hey, Nilly." Another poke. "Hey-"

Pure Vanilla shifts suddenly, throwing himself to the side with a sharp groan; Shadow Milk's hand is carried along by the movement, his palm smacking against the other's chest - a brush, quick and fleeting, against Pure Vanilla's Soul Jam.

In a single gasp, Shadow Milk's world is ripped out from under him.

He's surrounded by darkness - not calm, not gentle. It churns around him, shoving at him as he stumbles, pulling on his limbs and forcing him to the ground. He scrambles to right himself, finding no purchase, struggling for air that is punched from him with each shuddering gasp.

His arms fly up above his head, pulled taught by invisible strings; he is hoisted aloft, dangling and twisting helplessly in the air as the wires bite painfully into his dough. An ugly, wicked cackle reverberates through the darkness, deafening in its cruelty. He squeezes his eyes shut; trying to block out the pain, the noise, the *fear*-

“Ah, ah, ah! Eyes open, now!”

Hideous, sneering laughter – his eyelids forced open, forced to view an enormous mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth grinning back at him. The sight is revolting, nauseating to his core; another laugh, a vicious tug to his strings as he’s rocked to and fro, slumped over like a helpless marionette.

“Aw!” the hideous voice coos. “Wake up, Dollface! No tapping out on me now!” The grin leans closer, a puff of putrid air on his dough.

“We’re not done playing yet, *Silly Vanilly*.”

The vision shatters like glass; Shadow Milk throws himself backwards with a hoarse gasp, slamming his side into a wooden beam as he tumbles to the floor. He grips at his chest, curled in the dirt as breaths coming in sharp, shuddering shakes. His eyes swim dangerously, still flitting between the fading cracks of realities.

A few feet away, movement stirs in the hay pile. A soft groan, the soft crunch of straw breaking under shifting weight. The sounds of rustling fabric; Pure Vanilla sitting up, rubbing at his eyes with a tired yawn.

“Mmm...” A yawn, followed by the pleased strain of a voice in mid-stretch. A pause. “Shadow Milk?”

Shadow Milk doesn’t look behind him; his hands are still clenched around his Soul Jam, still fighting to regain his breath. He can feel the other’s gaze upon him, shoulders tensing as the hay crunches with new movement.

“Shadow Milk?” Pure Vanilla’s voice carries new urgency; there’s hurried footsteps, a shadow cast as Pure Vanilla kneels beside him. “Shadow Milk, are you alright?”

Liar.

The thought is delirious, spinning around Shadow Milk’s head as he grits his teeth, forcing his furious breathing to slow.

*Liar, liar, **liar**.*

“Shadow Milk?”

A gentle touch to his cheek; Shadow Milk takes in his final gulp of air.

“Geez, Nilly!” Shadow Milk smacks the hand away; he rolls on his back, beaming up at the other with his trademark grin. “You pack quite a punch!”

Pure Vanilla pulls back, startled. “I- what?”

Shadow Milk slips out from under him, melding briefly into the shadows to reappear above the other’s head. “Guess it’s true what they say!” He shrugs his shoulders with practiced ease, smile firmly in place. “Let sleeping dogs lie! Or, in your case, half-crumbled old fools. Gotta say, wasn’t expecting the right-hook! Bravo! Points for the twist!”

“Right-hook?” Pure Vanilla reaches up, touching his chest in concern. “I- struck you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Shadow Milk replies easily. “I was just minding my own business, giving my good ol’ pal a few wake-up shakes. Just didn’t think you’d startle so badly! Who knew you had it in you, hm? Applause, applause!”

Pure Vanilla’s brows furrow with concern; his mouth dips into a small frown, gaze dropping downwards. “My... apologies. I didn’t...” A blink before he looks up again. “I did not mean to strike you, Shadow Milk. That is never something I wish to do.”

“I *said*, don’t worry about it.” Shadow Milk loops lazily in the air, rightening himself to fold his arms behind his back. “Maybe I deserved it, hm?”

Pure Vanilla’s frown instantly deepens; he takes a step forward, eyes sharp. “You don’t.”

Liar.

“Calm down!” Shadow Milk shrugs his shoulders again, all grin, all cheeky little amusement. “Hey, c’mon, why the long face? I thought we were going to play games tonight! No fun if you’re looking all sour and dour, buddy!”

“Shadow Milk-”

“Tell you what.” Shadow Milk motions behind him. “I’ll race you. Last one to the castle eats the first rook, m’kay?”

“Shadow-!”

Whatever Pure Vanilla replies is lost in a whirl of darkness-

Shadow Milk Cookie is already gone.

Chapter 10

Pure Vanilla isn't an easy Cookie to avoid.

To Shadow Milk's credit, he'd waited nearly an hour that night - staring at the clock, watching the minutes tick by. The minute hand, slowly circling around and around, had been his only focus, slowly counting down each beat of silence that enveloped Pure Vanilla's room. His eyes had never left it once, consumed by concentration, his mind pointedly blank as he'd waited for the sound of footsteps to approach.

When his patience had run dry, when he'd begrudgingly slipped into his other-realm to look through the other's eyes, he'd found Pure Vanilla hadn't moved an inch - still sitting in that haystack, staring emptily at the lamb nuzzling into his palm.

Shadow Milk had broken the connection with a snap, exiting the room in a violent burst of darkness.

He hasn't been back since.

Yet, despite oh-so-rudely lingering long into that wretched night, Pure Vanilla seems to have taken it upon himself to follow up every day since. When Shadow Milk retreats to his chambers, there's a knock on his door. When he sunbathes on the castle spires, a voice calls out for him below. Even when he settles in for a simple meal on the kitchen's ceilings, it's not long before the tapping of a repulsively familiar staff starts heading his way.

Shadow Milk knows Pure Vanilla is persistent, but refusing to take the hint is another matter entirely.

The castle becomes a chore, a cat-and-mouse that Shadow Milk is finding thoroughly unenjoyable. No matter how many whirlwinds he conjures or cackling marionettes he sets about the halls, Pure Vanilla is only ever two steps behind him, chasing him from room to room. Shadow Milk's name is perpetually on the other's lips, a ringing call that Shadow Milk has no intention of answering.

He leaves again.

Not far - not terribly far, anyway. He wanders the markets as a child, swiping anything that catches his fancy and discarding it minutes later in boredom. He drinks in the Crow's Nest Inn as a sailor, gulping down bitter brew that numbs his mind and paying with coins that melt into nothingness the moment he leaves. He, for a brief moment, switches the limbs of every Cookie within his view of the plaza. Because they're there. Because he can.

He seeks out Black Raisin Cookie.

She's a surprisingly difficult Cookie to find, all things considered. After meandering through the back alleyways he happens upon her house, but she isn't there. He searches the inn's rooftops, but they're empty of any sign of life. It isn't until he spies one of her crows,

following it nearly two miles before he finally spots her, nestled high in a treetop with a spyglass in hand.

As he approaches, she lowers the glass and gives him a wary look before finally nodding her head.

“Beast of Deceit.”

“Black Raisin Cookie.” He perks a brow when she says nothing else, staring at him with an unfamiliar coldness. “Hey, why the long face? Thought we were buds, bud.”

“You threw me.”

Ah. Right.

“Call it a friendly nudge.” Shadow Milk settles on the branch next to her; she gives him a wary stare, not moving an inch. “Oh, c’mon.” She continues staring; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes before flashing her a toothy grin. “Alright, alright! Sheesh, so touchy. Won’t happen again, m’kay?”

Black Raisin Cookie gives him an open once-over before lifting her spyglass, returning her gaze to the sky. “Why are you out here?”

“Why are *you*?” Shadow Milk counters. “Looking for more avian friends to add to your collection? You know, there is such a thing as a crazy crow lady.”

“Scouting.” She turns her glass to the right, leaning forward slightly. “Cake Monsters were spotted nearby a few nights ago.”

Shadow Milk tilts his head. “Up here? Vanilla Kingdom’s kinda high up in the sky for that, don’tcha think? What, they got wings now?”

“Could be. Or someone’s letting them in through the portal below.”

A shrug as Shadow Milk shifts on the branch. “Don’t look at me.”

“You were considered.”

Shadow Milk grins. “Aw. You really are a flatterer, you know that?”

Black Raisin Cookie lowers her spyglass, giving him another once-over. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Hmmm?”

“Why are you here?” Her stare is suspicious, yet tinged with some strange hint of amusement. “You two fighting again?”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

Black Raisin Cookie shrugs. "It's why you hung out with me last time."

"We're-" There's no we. "*I* am not fighting with anyone." Shadow Milk kicks one of his legs in irritation. "Can't a poor, handsome Beast get bored from time to time without the third degree? I thought we were best buds now. You're hurting my feelings."

"Hm." Black Raisin Cookie turns her gaze back to the sky. "If you say so."

"Still." Shadow Milk picks at a loose leaf on the branch. "If you have more awful things to say about him, I might be open to listening."

A sigh; there's movement, the branch shaking as Black Raisin Cookie begins deftly lowering herself down. "Come on."

Shadow Milk watches her nimbly clamber along the trunk, perking a brow. "Come on, what?"

"If you're going to chat, you're going to work." She glances up at him, nodding her head towards the ground. "I have traps set up in the perimeter. I need to check them."

A scoff. "I'm not here to work."

"Well, I am." Black Raisin Cookie drops to the forest floor, craning her neck up with her hand on her hip. "So if you want to complain about all the little ways he drives you crazy, you can do it walking."

"I'm not here to *walk*, either!" he snaps back - but she's already trudging away, her flock of crows following closely at her back. Shadow Milk scowls; he bounces his foot irritably, gaze flicking between the ground and her swiftly retreating form.

Ugh.

Fine.

If Black Raisin Cookie is startled by Shadow Milk slipping out of the shadows beside her, she doesn't show it; she just continues walking, eyes forward as the leaves crunch beneath her boots. There's a half-glance, a cursory nod, and then she's weaving between the trunks, set on a path Shadow Milk's clueless to.

He follows, but he's not happy about it.

"Where are we going?"

"North." Black Raisin Cookie ducks under a low-hanging branch, holding it aside as he passes beside her. "But that's not what you're here to ask me."

Shadow Milk perks a brow. "Getting straight to the point, are we?"

"I don't enjoy beating around the bush." A hop over a fallen log before she glances back at him. "So, go on. What's he done this time?"

“I never said there was a him.”

“Sure.”

Shadow Milk’s mouth twitches; he’s not sure if he wants to scowl or grin at her boldness.

“You were a lot more fun tipsy, you know that?”

“I’m sure I was. Unfortunately, I don’t drink on the job.” Black Raisin Cookie beckons him past a curved trunk. “This way.”

A hum as Shadow Milk curves through the air after her. There’s a moment of silence, broken only by the sounds of sticks snapping beneath her boots, before he remarks:

“You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

“I never said that.” Black Raisin Cookie doesn’t look back at him, gaze set firmly forward as she walks. “Any Cookie would be a fool not to be wary of you.”

Shadow Milk tilts his head, considering. “You don’t act like it.”

“What would be the point? As I said, you’re not my fight.”

“So, what?” Shadow Milk drifts closer, hovering over her head as she continues to stare forward. “Transactional civility? You pretend to play nice, hope I don’t crumble you to bits? Gotta say, the odds are *not* in your favor on that one.”

Black Raisin Cookie swiftly ducks, weaving to the side to continue her path; Shadow Milk *tsks* under his breath. There’s another long pause, three heartbeats of silence before:

“Two things can be true.”

Shadow Milk cocks his head. “Hm?”

Black Raisin Cookie places her hand on a rotted-out trunk, finally looking back at him. “It’s in my best interest to get along with you,” she says bluntly. “I gain nothing from drawing the ire of a foe I hold no real weapon against.”

Typical. Just as he’d suspected.

“But,” she continues suddenly, “you have also not given me a reason to be hostile to you in the first place.” A pause. “Aside from *throwing* me, I have no quarrel with you.”

A scoff; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “What? You’d be nice, just because?”

“Yes?” She raises a quizzical eyebrow. “Why do I need an excuse to be nice to other Cookies? Do *you* need excuses?”

Shadow Milk blinks – then swiftly narrows his eyes. “But that’s not *why* you’re playing nice,” he hisses back. “You’re doing it out of fear.”

“If you were powerless, I’d still be polite.” Black Raisin Cookie turns away, continuing on her path. “More so, probably. As I said, you’ve given me no reason to dislike you outright.” A pause. “Aside from-”

“Yes, yes, the *throwing*,” Shadow Milk snaps back. “And what if I did give you a reason, hm? What then?”

Black Raisin Cookie glances back; her footsteps falter momentarily. “Are you threatening me?”

“I *mean*-” Shadow Milk slips through the shadows, reappearing before her in an instant – to her credit, she does not flinch. “What if I *had* hurt you? What if you had every reason to hate me in every tiny little crumb of your being? What then, hm?” He leans closer; she tilts her head away, eyes narrowing with a grimace.

“Are you still going to play nice?” The air around them darkens, and his narrowed eyes track her uneasy swallow. “Will you pretend? Submit to your own powerlessness to stop me, and pray I fall for your pathetic little niceties instead? Is that your wretched little plan?”

Black Raisin Cookie watches him warily; every inch of her body is tense, yet she holds his narrowed gaze with surprising tenacity. They do not move; the wind rushes past them, rustling her hair as her crows caw overhead.

“This isn’t about me, is it?”

The darkness drops; Shadow Milk scowls, floating backwards as he crosses his arms across his chest.

Black Raisin straightens up; she gives him an open once-over but says nothing, turning on her heels to continue her trek.

Annoying.

She must have learned it from him.

The rest of their journey passes in silence; Black Raisin Cookie offers nothing, and what little Shadow Milk irritably comments on she responds with short remarks or distracted quips. Her concentration is on her surroundings, eyes scanning the area as they move from clearing to clearing, all decorated with traps.

All empty.

Shadow Milk gives the latest contraption a passing once-over as she turns it over in her hand and sighs; it’s a simple cage, a Jelly haunch dangling from a string within, covered in leaves to camouflage it in the forest floor. Pitiful, haphazard. Is she even trying?

“You’ll never catch anything like that,” he remarks dryly.

Black Raisin Cookie looks up. “What? They’re extremely effective.”

Shadow Milk perks an unimpressed brow. “For what? Small game?”

A pause; Black Raisin Cookie’s expression wavers slightly. “Well – yes. That’s what we used to use them for.”

A sigh, long and theatrical; Shadow Milk shakes his head and spreads his hands in dismay. “My dear girl. What *are* they teaching you in school these days?”

Black Raisin Cookie scowls. “I’m not a trapper, alright? My job was to guard the village, not hunt for it.” She motions to the cage. “What would *you* do differently, then?”

Shadow Milk leans forward, arms behind his back as he studies the apparatus. “For one thing,” he remarks, “Cake Monsters are hunters, not scavengers. You’re not going to gain their interest with old, rotting meat. You need something alive, or at least something that gives off the illusion of liveliness.”

A glance at the cage before Black Raisin Cookie’s looking back up at him. “Like what?”

“Mmm...” Shadow Milk tilts his head, considering. “Something mechanical, perhaps. A cut-out of a Cookie that turns back and forth on a piston. A lump of dough that moves and shakes on a hook like an injured animal. Or, if you can’t get your hands – sorry, *hand* on anything like that, bait it with something small, alive, and disposable.” He grins, all teeth. “Have you met Cuccidati Cookie, perhaps?”

Black Raisin Cookie turns the trap over; her gaze is considering, thoughtful. “Those aren’t bad ideas.” She glances up at him. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“My dear,” Shadow Milk drawls, “what I *don’t* know can’t fill even the teensiest thimble there is. Which is why I *also* know that this whole endeavor is entirely pointless.”

“It’s not pointless.” Black Raisin Cookie is getting to her feet, dusting herself off. “It’s to protect the Cookies under my care.”

“Oh, but it is!” Shadow Milk twists around her in the air, grinning ear to ear. “Completely and utterly. Really, why waste your time trying to delay the inevitable? It’s all going to come crumbling down eventually.”

Black Raisin Cookie’s stare is wary; she takes a step back, visibly on guard. “What do you mean? What are you planning?”

“Moi? Nothing.” Shadow Milk pauses, flipping around as he considers. “I mean, not at this exact moment. Long-term stuff, sure, take the Soul Jam, crumble the kingdom to dust, that old song and dance.” He shrugs. “But I’m talking big picture! Do you *really* enjoy spending your days poking around in the dirt out here? Why not go have some fun instead? Your little lifespans are *so* fleeting – why not actually enjoy the itty bitty time you have left?”

“I am-” Black Raisin Cookie stares at him, searching his face with a strained expression. “Not old.”

Shadow Milk sweeps out his cane in a grand gesture; in an instant, the forest blurs around them. Beautiful darkness swells from the ground; marionettes drop and twists from the trees as golden moons and blackened suns fill the twinkling sky. A symphony of Shadow Milk's own making sings through the air as his puppets twirl and dance in beautiful spirals, brushing against Black Raisin Cookie as she flinches at every touch.

"You are fragile." Shadow Milk's voice is warmth itself, carrying through the clearing. "Crumbling with every breath you take. Deluding yourself that the few extra seconds of such a miserable existence will be worth the pain of such a life. Why not embrace true sweetness instead? Why not dance along the whispers of a sweet lie, where there is no pain, no strife? Why continue, when the truth is that nothing you have done will ever matter?"

Black Raisin Cookie turns her head, expression tight as she surveys her illusionary surroundings; there is a flicker, a tensing in her shoulders – before she suddenly looks straight at him.

"Can you just go talk to him?"

The music abruptly stops.

"I—" A moment of hesitation; Black Raisin Cookie's uneasy gaze briefly darts around the now-frozen illusion. "I don't know what's bothering you. But clearly something happened that you're taking out on me. And since I'm not interested in... whatever this is, can you please just..." She waves her hand vaguely, eyes still sharply scanning her surroundings. "Go deal with it instead?"

A beat of silence passes. The marionettes hang limply; the sun and moon darken against the sky.

Shadow Milk flicks his cane up, and Black Raisin Cookie goes flying.

She tumbles across the forest floor; needles and leaves stick from her hair as she scrambles to right herself, shouting another slew of creative curses as she reaches for her weapon.

Pointless.

The clearing is already empty.

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The cost of immortality comes with a price heavier than Shadow Milk has ever been willing to pay; it is, however, of some small comfort that sleep is not technically a requirement in his continued existence.

Shadow Milk Cookie does not detest sleep – far from it. From the moment of his creation to his current miserable existence, there had always been peace to be found in its arms. To curl

and warm himself beneath the sun's rays, to cloak himself in blankets and burrow against the chilliest nights. When cursed with overwhelming knowledge, the chance to simply shut his eyes and slip away into temporary oblivion was a luxury he treasured dearly.

Which is why it is now all the more annoying that it so viciously eludes him.

There are still plenty of places to settle in – pleasant spots of darkness, warm patches of sun, comfortable beds in empty inn chambers. Shadow Milk tries them all, tossing and turning as he wills his eyes shut and grits his teeth. Waiting out his breath to settle, for forced darkness to take him and grant him some fleeting relief.

It does not come.

Silvery marionette strings dance beneath eyelids every time he tries; echoes of long-gone cackles reverberate in his dough every time Shadow Milk comes even close to slipping away. It always ends the same way – his heartbeat quickening, embers of rage sparking as that accursed vision flickers in shards across his mind. He tears off the darkness, the covers, sinks his claws into anything surrounding him in blind rage and *rips*.

He finds a new spot. He tries again.

He fails.

There is only one location he hasn't attempted, one location he is loathe to even spare a passing thought to. He's well aware of the potential, the possibility of reprieve; his Soul Jam tingles knowingly every time he finds his mind drifting towards it, before viciously forcing his thoughts elsewhere. Yet no matter how hard he tries, no matter how desperately he tries to think of anything else, a sullen whisper of promise lingers in his ear.

Their connection.

While it may tip the pair of them into slumber every time, Shadow Milk has no intention of slinking back into Pure Vanilla's arms for something so – trifling. So unnecessary. They'll be forced back together sooner or later; there's no need to rush it, not while his Soul Jam only pulses with longing, not pain.

No, not longing. Irritation. Venom. Loathing. A familiar sting of a lie that had slipped right through his defenses, because once again, he'd wanted to believe it.

Shadow Milk can't run from it this time. He doesn't have a choice.

He returns to his room.

He hasn't been back in some time; aside from his initial swathe of destruction, there'd been little interest in returning aside from the occasional daytime nap. He toes a large piece of wood jutting out from the shattered remains of his dresser, floating across the scattered wreckage of what had once been a stately room. Broken scraps of furniture, shards of glass, the rotting corpses of long-wilted flowers all stare accusingly back at him from the floor.

This room, this gift, had once been beautiful, luxurious, welcoming. But, like so many other things, he'd destroyed it – and now all that remained was a scene of carnage, as if from a wild beast's rampage.

How fitting.

The bed is still mostly intact; it lies on the ground, discarded from when he'd lowered it for his – guest, the last time. With a flick of Shadow Milk's cane it thuds back against the ceiling, shaking briefly from the impact. He floats upwards, grabbing the sheets as they fall to wrap himself tight; when his back hits the mattress, Shadow Milk cranes his neck to stare emptily at the wreckage below as fatigue washes over him.

How wretched it is to ache for reprieve, yet feel so unwilling to close his eyes.

Minutes pass; Shadow Milk's eyelids flutter weakly, closing tight only to re-open moments later. Unwelcome dread crawls through his mind with each swallow of darkness, a heavy weight on his chest. Even here, in the sanctity of the domain he'd carved out with his own claws, he is restless. Uneasy.

His Soul Jam tingles as he brushes a hand over it; the sensation is anything but pleasant.

The tingling sensation does not abate even after his hand withdraws; unfortunately, Shadow Milk is not given long to wonder why. As he tosses and turns, twisting the sheets this way and that, the sensation graduates to a flurry of electric sparks – his breath catches, eyes clenching shut as he exhales through gritted teeth. A sense of foreboding is itching at the back of his mind, as if some foul presence is bearing down upon him.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ah. Well, he hadn't been wrong.

Shadow Milk's hands twist in the sheets as the sound of Pure Vanilla's staff carries in the darkness; the rhythmic beat echoes with the angry pulsing of his Jam. The other's footfalls are the tolling of his death bell, a forewarning of what is to come as they slow and stop just outside the door.

A knock. Gentle. Hesitant.

“Shadow Milk?”

A sharp exhale of breath; Shadow Milk says nothing, refusing to open his eyes. It is pointless to pretend – if he can feel Pure Vanilla's presence this strongly through the door, the other already knows he is here.

How had he known to come? Had their connection grown this strong, to be able to sense him from afar and come running to his side? Or was this routine? Had he simply come here every night on hope alone, knocking and waiting for an answer from an empty room?

Another knock. “Shadow Milk?”

He refuses to answer.

A pause, silence reigning between them. “I’d like to speak with you.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes behind closed lids. Of course. More talking. That’s all they do, all his life has become.

The door handle turns – slowly, carefully. Shadow Milk can practically taste the hesitation radiating off the other as the door creaks open, light spilling in to ruin his perfect darkness. The tap of a staff, a single step forward as the door audibly creaks shut.

Shadow Milk can feel the other’s eyes upon him – but as long as he keeps his own shut, as long as he makes not a single noise, all Pure Vanilla will see is a sheet-wrapped blur locked fast in slumber. Unconsciousness is an easy role to play, and Shadow Milk is nothing if not a perfect actor.

“I know you’re awake.”

Crap.

Pure Vanilla’s staff taps loudly as he crosses the room; the careful footsteps, the scrapings of shattered wood being moved aside all grate on Shadow Milk’s ears. The other is not leaving; if anything, it sounds like he’s settling in for the long haul.

“Shadow Milk.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is directly below him now. “Please. I need to speak with you.”

A sigh, low and long. Shadow Milk still keeps his eyes shut, rolling onto his side to put half his back to the other. A clear dismissal. A hint that is impossible not to take.

“I want to talk about what happened.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes again; this time, he reluctantly cracks open a single lid, if only to send the obnoxious pest an irritable glare. “Seriously? I am *trying* to sleep here. Come back later. Or preferably, never.”

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Pure Vanilla’s meeting his gaze, no trace of reluctance in his own. “This is the only chance I’ve had in days.”

“I am not avoiding you.” Shadow Milk closes his eyes again, turning away as he tugs the sheets up to his chin. “I am uninterested in you. There’s far more to experience outside these disgustingly shiny walls than the poor company of a half-blind fool.”

Pure Vanilla’s silence stretches; Shadow Milk can hear the rustle of his robes, as if the other’s shifting in place. Then, quietly:

“Do you truly find me poor company?”

Shadow Milk shrugs; he refuses to take the bait, refuses to bow to the melancholy pulse in his Soul Jam. “Hate to break it to you Nilly, but you’re not exactly the crowd-pleaser you think

you are. I mean, asking for my time and then not even bothering to show up? Not exactly racking up the positive reviews here.”

“I am sorry, Shadow Milk.” Pure Vanilla audibly takes a step forward. “I did not realize you would truly be waiting for me. I had thought you would not wish to see me.”

“I *don't* want to see you.” Shadow Milk re-opens his eyes, sitting up in bed so he can look Pure Vanilla dead in the eyes. “Is that not clear? I feel like I’ve made that pretty clear.”

Pure Vanilla’s gaze is pained, his neck craned upwards as Shadow Milk glares down at him from above. “Why?”

A simple question. One that Shadow Milk has, through several nights of eluded sleep, well prepared for.

“I don’t want to play with you anymore.”

Pure Vanilla’s gaze falters. “What?”

“You’re boring.” Shadow Milk flips himself over in the air, righting himself so he can stare the other down properly. “I’m tired of you. Tired of the *talking*, and the *feelings*, and all your pathetic little games. You were and always have been a toy to me. And now? I’m done with you.”

The silence that rings in his wake is deafening.

Shadow Milk turns away immediately; whatever expression Pure Vanilla is making, he doesn’t want to see it. His arms fold across his chest, pressing tightly against his Soul Jam as it writhes, roars in his chest with displeasure. There is a chill, an ache that is clutching at his core, dragging it down into his stomach.

It doesn’t matter. He ignores it.

Nothing is said for – Shadow Milk doesn’t know how long. The clock that had laid in the corner remains smashed to pieces, its feeble hands slumped limply in disrepair. The only sound in Shadow Milk’s ears is his own, carefully measured breathing as he waits. Braces. Grits his teeth for the inevitable rebuttal, from this pesky, persistent, wretch of a-

“Did I truly strike you?”

Shadow Milk stills.

“I have played that night over many times in my head.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is quiet, measured. “I could not – still cannot understand it. How I, with my bare hand, could possibly strike you with enough force to send you, of all Cookies, reeling. How I-” A pause. “How I could have possibly missed feeling such a hit myself, mirrored in our connection.”

The sound of a step; Pure Vanilla is moving closer. “If I – if what you claim happened that night truly did, then I can only continue to apologize for my behavior. I have never wanted to

raise a hand against you. I will make amends any way that I can, because that is not something you deserve.”

Liar.

“But I know you are impulsive.” Another step. “And whether by my hand or another’s, you were hurt that night. So I want to ask you, here and now, one last time.”

Shadow Milk grits his teeth; he can feel Pure Vanilla’s searching gaze on his back, burning on his dough.

“Shadow Milk,” Pure Vanilla asks softly. “Did I truly strike you?”

A silence that stretches on for far, far too long.

“Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. Does it matter?” Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his back, lifting his gaze towards the cracked ceiling. “It doesn’t change anything I’ve said.”

“It matters to me.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is revoltingly gentle. “I think it matters to you, too.”

“It doesn’t,” Shadow Milk snaps, twisting around in the air. “None of this does. Not you, not that night. Aren’t you tired of this?” he continues, sudden heat rising into his voice. “Always so persistent, so stubborn about every little thing. You think I’m endeared by you chasing after my heels like some pathetic stray? I’ve already told you - I’m *done* with you.”

“What happened?” Pure Vanilla’s gaze searches his own with frightening steadiness. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Nothing *happened*,” Shadow Milk hisses, hands balling into fists.

“Then why were you clutching your Soul Jam?”

Shadow Milk stiffens; his eyes narrow. “I wasn’t.”

“You were.” Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches up, touching his own. “I told you – I have played that night over a thousand times in my mind. I remember your pain, along with a beat through our connection. I remember feeling as if we were briefly one, as if you were within me inside my mind.” A pause. “And I remember waking up from a terrible dream.”

A quick snap of his head; Shadow Milk is turning away again, anger boiling in his jam. “You’re a half-blind old fool. You remember less than I’ve ever forgotten.”

“I’m very attentive when it comes to you.”

Oh, Shadow Milk is in *no* mood for cute little quips. “Get out.”

“Why are you pushing me away?” Pure Vanilla is unflinching, boldly taking another step forward. “Whatever you glimpsed, it was only a dream.”

Liar.

Shadow Milk's hands ball into fists. "I told you to *get out*."

"Tell me." Pure Vanilla is at his back, staring up with a gaze Shadow Milk refuses to meet. "Why has it shaken you so? Why are you so convinced you must run from me?"

Shadow Milk's teeth grit, his Soul Jam trembling with liquid fire. Burning, pulsing, *searing* in his core.

"Tell me," Pure Vanilla repeats softly. "Which of us are you truly angry with right now?"

The silence that follows is deafening. It crawls along Shadow Milk's dough like rivulets of ice, seeping in as something dark and dangerous settles in his chest. Pure Vanilla's presence is a flickering light, one that the darkness swiftly filling the room is all too eager to snuff out.

"Shadow Milk?"

Hesitance. A note of unease.

"You know..." Shadow Milk's own voice is strange in his ears, an unpleasant drawl that oozes like slime. "Something's been *bothering* me."

Pure Vanilla audibly shifts behind him.

"Ever since we started this little..." Shadow Milk clucks his tongue. "Cohabitation of ours, you've never *once* called me by my name."

"What?" Confusion. Curiosity. "Shadow Milk-"

"Not that name." Shadow Milk turns, arms behind his back as he gazes down at Pure Vanilla with an eerie smile. "My true name. The name that defines all that I am."

Pure Vanilla's brows knit, a brief look of puzzlement – before realization dawns in those pathetically milky eyes.

There it is.

"See," Shadow Milk continues, floating closer as he leans in. "I can't help but think that's the root of our problems. You, telling yourself sweet little lies, and trying to pretend you don't see what's right in front of you. I've said it before - you really should get more comfortable with those ugly truths you're so fond of."

Pure Vanilla's grip on his staff tightens; he holds Shadow Milk's gaze but there is uneasiness in his stance, trepidation in his brow.

"Go on." Shadow Milk cocks his head, a perfectly sculpted smile on his face. "Say it."

Silence; a swallow as Pure Vanilla stands his ground.

"Say my name, Pure Vanilla Cookie."

A blink; shoulders squaring as Pure Vanilla intakes a breath.

“Shadow Milk Cookie.”

The claw that slams into the floor startles even Shadow Milk himself – his blurring vision slowly traces the appendage down lines of glistening black fur, twisting and trailing back to his own shoulder.

Ah. It’s been a while.

Pure Vanilla’s gaze has widened; Shadow Milk cranes his neck back, feeling his body twist and contort as pain and striking numbness intertwine in his limbs. His hands, massive and clawed, sink into the floor, cracking and sending shards of tiles scattering beneath his grasp. His teeth, bared in a snarl, elongate in a mouth, a snout that is far too long, too curved in wicked defiance. Bristling black fur spreads along his limbs as his back arcs with a sickening crack, head scraping the ceiling as his body fills a room far too small to contain him. Darkness itself oozes off his body, splattering to the ground in slimy pools of ink as he bears down upon that small, repulsive light still flickering before him.

Shadow Milk opens his mouth wide, flashing rows upon rows of sickening fangs; he leans in, pressing the tip of his snout to the other’s chest.

He can feel Pure Vanilla’s heartbeat, an erratic staccato stuttered along uneven breaths.

“*Say it,*” Shadow Milk rasps; his voice fills the air with sickening force, shaking the room itself. “*Say my name.*”

Pure Vanilla’s hands are clutched tight around his staff; his gaze is faltering, flickering between pathetic attempts at resolve and the fear Shadow Milk can all but taste rolling off him.

Still, he is silent. Still, he does not move.

Shadow Milk lunges forward, jaw unhinging; his maw surrounds Pure Vanilla on either side, a bear trap of fangs perfectly encircling the other in open threat. Hot, furious breath that ruffles the other’s hair as Pure Vanilla winces, drawing in on himself as Shadow Milk looms overhead.

It would be so easy. A single snap of his jaws, one strong bite. Shadow Milk would be rid of him, rid of all of this. Just one bite. One little twitch.

That’s all it would take.

“***SAY IT!***” Shadow Milk snarls, slamming his claws to the floor. “***SAY WHAT I AM!***”

Silence.

Shadow Milk waits; jaw poised, muscles aching for release. There is nothing – not a whimper, not a gasp, not a cry of submission or fear. When he finally, finally tilts his head to

cast a suspicious gaze down at the other, he finds Pure Vanilla still stood there, head bowed to the floor.

He is trembling.

The sight is foreign; Shadow Milk sharply pulls his head back, leaning away as a fresh storm of twisting blackness tears at his core. His lips curl with distaste; his gaze averts to the wreckage of the room, vision blurred by –

Shadow Milk doesn't know. He doesn't want to know.

“Get out.” There's only one thing he's certain of right now – the desire to have Pure Vanilla Cookie anywhere but here. Shadow Milk tosses his head to the side, his paws scraping against the floor as he begins turning away. His body is too large, too trapped in such a small space. The walls crack and splinter, his fur tugging from the friction-

No. Not from the walls.

There's a hand clutching onto him.

Shadow Milk rears back, a furious snarl on his lips – but Pure Vanilla's grasp is firm, pulled up by the movement as the other clings to the fur on Shadow Milk's chest with both hands. A shake, a vicious swing of Shadow Milk's head as he tries to dislodge the other, crashing onto his side as the room quakes from the impact. A desperate gasp rips from his throat at the feeling of a hand grabbing at his brooch, *his brooch-*

A touch, firm and unrelenting as Shadow Milk howls his defiance.

It is too late.

Clink.

Chapter 11

There is no gentleness in this descent.

Shadow Milk is thrashing, crashing through layers of darkness below that break like jagged rocks against his dough. He shoves and snarls, all teeth all fury, trying to dislodge the presence clinging to him.

Light. Warm and desperate, wrapping tightly around him even as he roars his fury to the sky.

The fall is dizzying, sickening – down and down, slipping deeper and deeper as twisted reality fragments around him. His vision dances with spots of light – amber, white, pink, black – all blending and swirling around him in blinding speed. He can't see, can't think, scrambling to regain his senses. His self.

He throws his head back and screams – and the light falters.

It's brief. A flicker, a momentary lapse.

It's enough.

Shadow Milk grasps at the darkness around him, throwing himself into its depths; in an instant the sensation is gone, slipping away as he hurtles downwards into oblivion. The dream swims around him, formless blurs taking hazy shapes as the sea of black melts to sky-

His side hits the ground.

Hard.

Shadow Milk forces himself up on trembling limbs, chest still heaving with scattered breaths; the ground beneath his paws is a milky silhouette of green, a shifting blur that rustles along the same icy wind that shudders through his fur. His still-swimming gaze picks out the tall outlines of trees surrounding him on every side, pressing in close as they sway beneath a sunless sky.

A flicker of light glints high above the treetops.

Shadow Milk runs.

The grass beneath his paws squelches like water as he sprints, diving through the forest headfirst. There is no thought, no course – he ducks, he weaves, he pants in ragged breaths, tongue lolling past his fangs as he hurtles through the woods like prey beset on all sides. He does not stop, cannot stop; he can feel the presence at his back, pursuing him around every bend. Closer and closer it draws, a sickening, radiating warmth. It is unrelenting, unrepentant – bearing down on him with arms outstretched.

Shadow Milk throws himself to the ground; it breaks beneath him, shattering like glass as he tumbles forward into the black.

He is falling again.

The dream twists, wrapping around his body, pulling at his dough as Shadow Milk clenches his eyes shut and clutches at himself desperately. Black blurs and blends as color and form writhe in agony beneath his eyelids; Shadow Milk exhales through gritted teeth as reality splinters with a sickening crack.

A burst of light forces his eyes open; his vision swims as the dream takes new shape, hazy shapes solidifying into looming bookcases, scattered papers, a sprawling desk laid out before him. The faintest flickers of candlelight cast long shadows on the walls as their dripping wax oozes to the floor.

Shadow Milk is seated, feathery quill in hand. He reaches a hand up and touches smooth, furless dough.

He is himself.

Before him, a sea of faceless Cookies spill around his office; armored, decorated with crests long lost, standing proud beneath banners soot-stained and torn. Their angry words fill the air like misty fog – indistinguishable, discordant sounds that flow like murky water through Shadow Milk's mind. They shout amongst themselves, slamming their gauntleted hands on the desk and gesturing all around them.

Shadow Milk's vacant gaze follows their movements, sliding over to the window that now looms menacingly over them all.

Outside, a clash of colors. Smoke and fire licking at the air; the rumbles of earth breaking beneath the heels of something far, far greater than any had ever known. The roar of Beasts, shattering the very air they claim dominion over. Mountainous, monstrous forms tearing apart the world itself that holds down their chains.

His chains.

Another slam on his desk – they're angry. Desperate. They need answers.

He won't give them.

A hand touches his own; Shadow Milk hazily looks up to see a simple soldier gazing back at him, his eyes gentle, saddened –

Mismatched. A milky pair of blue and gold.

Shadow Milk tears his hand away, stumbling back; the dream melts away, darkness sweeping away every trace of color. The soldier vanishes, the form scattering like dust as that same flickering light stands in its place.

There's a beat, a single moment as if the light seems hesitant to approach.

Shadow Milk swipes his hand up; a wall of darkness shoots up between them, blocking the light from view.

He runs again.

Each step is stumbling, sinking deeper into the pools of black as Shadow Milk struggles to remain upright. The dream shifts sharply with each shaky breath; he is trudging through snow, sinking in sand, staggering beneath overgrowth that chokes the air with the buzzing of insects. Wind whistles through mountainous valleys as the sea swallows him, dragging him down before Shadow Milk finally, finally falls to his knees. His chest heaves in breaths as he stares exhaustedly, emptily down at his hands –

Hands with silvery, glimmering threads woven tight around them.

Shadow Milk rears back, shaking his hands to try and dislodge them; each flailing motion only draws the threads tighter. They cut into his dough, scraping along the floor even as he leans away as far as he can-

Only to see a limp, golden figure being dragged along behind them.

Ice curls in his jam.

Shadow Milk lunges forward, sharp teeth snapping down on the threads; he pulls, yanking his head to and fro as he pulls as hard as he can. The threads hold strong, refusing to snap, to tear – they glimmer mischievously, giggling at his desperation. Their laughter soars with each panted breath, spiraling around him as Shadow Milk struggles in vain; their mocking jeers turning into familiar, wicked cackling that reverberates through his dough.

A soft, haunting melody dances through the shadows around him.

The threads snap upwards, yanking Shadow Milk's arms high above his head; he is hoisted aloft, dangling and twisting in the air with nauseating familiarity. His body hangs helplessly as Shadow Milk lifts tired eyes upwards to the smile – that same, sickening smile leering down at him from above. Glittering, mismatched eyes crinkled in mirth as Shadow Milk is swayed to and fro to the gentle, discordant beat of the music.

What's wrong? A voice taunts at him, a perfect, twisted mimicry of his own. *I thought you loved playing.*

A sharp, jerking motion; Shadow Milk's body snaps to the side, shuddering from the motion. His dough is stretched, pulled painfully as the strings tighten – and the smile only widens.

Come on. Isn't this fun? Isn't this what you wanted?

The thing bearing down on him is monstrous, its presence choking his senses to the point of nothingness. It is a monster wearing his smile, his face, cooing so gently as it bares pointed teeth in a wicked grin.

A clawed hand reaches for him, grasping tightly as it crushes the air from his lungs. Shadow Milk's head slumps forward; he exhales a final breath, eyes fluttering shut.

Something glimmers on the edge of his vision – it is the only warning he gets.

Light bursts forth; it is blinding, searing as a strangled cry howls through the darkness. Shadow Milk feels the creature's hold on him loosen - he slips from its grasp, threads melting away around him as he hurtles limply down into the black –

A hand grasps tight around his wrist, halting him in place.

Shadow Milk's eyes flutter open to see Truthless Recluse staring emptily back at him.

The other slowly floats down, tapping his staff to the ground; Shadow Milk is lowered down beside him, feet finding purchase in the darkness as he struggles momentarily to catch his balance. Through it all, Truthless Recluse holds tightly onto his wrist, cold gaze tracing over the lines of Shadow Milk's face. He says nothing as Shadow Milk's breaths begin to slow, fatigue washing over him while aching exhaustion settles deep in his chest.

A short exhale; Shadow Milk lifts his gaze back up to the other staring back at him in silence. Shadow Milk tiredly tilts his head, eyes tracing over the familiar lines of robes he'd styled himself; a perfect pattern, for the perfect doll. Cold and beautiful, indifferent and venomous in the same breath. The one he'd chosen to stay at his side, forever.

Shadow Milk's eyes slowly slip shut – before he slowly shakes his head in refusal.

When his eyes reopen, the illusion is gone.

Pure Vanilla is gazing gently back at him.

Against his will, Shadow Milk's knees buckle; he sinks to the floor with a groan as Pure Vanilla swiftly bends to catch him. They both lower themselves together – Shadow Milk, slumping forward and Pure Vanilla, pulling him in close. They kneel together in the darkness, a gentle quiet stretching out between them. Shadow Milk is too far gone, too exhausted to do anything but allow his face to bury in the other's shoulder, arms hanging limply at his side.

Pure Vanilla's hand comes up, brushing a loose strand of hair from Shadow Milk's face with familiar tenderness. He says nothing, only cups his palm around the curve of Shadow Milk's cheek.

The touch is warm, a gentle pulse beneath its dough.

Shadow Milk is no longer dreaming.

When he finally opens his eyes, the darkness around them has bled away; hazy shapes of reality settle in around him as the tattered remnants of his room slowly filter through Shadow Milk's mind. They're still kneeling together, surrounded by the scattered wreckage and freshly-cracked floors, now crumbled from the weight of Shadow Milk's claws. His beast form has dissipated, melted away and left him as he was; yet, without the fur cloaking his body, the night air surrounding them carries a chill that is far too brisk for his liking.

It's cold. Too cold.

Shadow Milk shivers, drawing his shoulders up tight; Pure Vanilla simply presses in closer, wrapping Shadow Milk in the firm warmth of his arms.

Quiet settles across the room, seeping in through his dough as Shadow Milk allows himself to simply be held. There's no fight left in him, only exhaustion and a bitter taste in his mouth as Pure Vanilla's arms tighten with a gentle squeeze, as if to lock him in place.

A pointless gesture. Shadow Milk's too tired to run again.

A small sigh; Pure Vanilla's breath tickles gently at the side of Shadow Milk's neck. Pure Vanilla pulls back slightly, tracing his hand down to catch under Shadow Milk's chin and tilting it upwards, as if trying to encourage Shadow Milk to meet his gaze.

Shadow Milk's eyes lid and avert. He refuses.

A hum, soft and gentle. "Shadow Milk?"

Pointless. Inane. There is no one else here, none but two wretched halves of a miserable whole kneeling among the wreckage.

Another tender touch, a hand stroking through his hair. "I'd like to show you something." A pause. "Will you allow me?"

Meaningless drivel. What good would a *no* even do?

Shadow Milk keeps his eyes lowered; he offers no response, no resistance. Perhaps if he's quiet, perhaps if he's still and silent for just long enough, Pure Vanilla will simply get up and leave.

The hand settles in the nape of his neck. "Please?"

Futile.

Shadow Milk's eyes slip shut again, any dregs of resistance worn away by sheer exhaustion. "Do what you want," he rasps hoarsely.

Pure Vanilla shifts, robes rustling; the faintest brush of a palm at his brooch is the only warning Shadow Milk gets before the world melts away once more.

It's not a fall this time; there's no sharp plummet, no storm of darkness ripping him away. Reality simply shifts, a simple step forward that drags him along by the wrist.

Scenes shift around him like a flickering screen, fragments of memories that flit away with each tired blink of his eyes. Images of the spire, the crescent moon, the twisting labyrinth of his own design sprawl out before him. He sees himself leering down with an ugly grin, cane in hand; he sees the shock, the fury that envelops him as that damnable light stretches out across his once-perfect sky.

The vision pushes him forward; Shadow Milk stumbles, looking up to find himself standing in his own room. He watches himself sweep his cane, a swathe of destruction erupting from a

simple twitch of his fingers. He watches as his double turns, giving a smile that is all teeth, all malice – until the scene blends again. He’s sitting on a bed, hand gently cupping his own face – a face that is softened, quieted by reluctant acceptance.

The images flit by quicker after that, a whirlwind of memories whipping by like gusts of wind. A plush, held tight in his hands. A chess piece, disappearing down his double’s gullet. A laugh, shared between them. A smile that is crinkled with mirth, not malice. Warmth that settles in his chest.

Anger. Fury. Searing light that battles the darkness grasping at his limbs. A cold stare from a familiar, beautiful woman that makes his heart flutter in confusion. Longing and misery swirling in tandem as he stares down into a half-emptied mug. His own smile again, looming over him in bed, with a teasing grin and flirtatious twinkle in his eyes. Lying together, a hand tangling in his hair.

Separation. Reunion. Bliss that swims alongside a frightening warmth in his chest as he gazes down at his own sleeping face.

A wolf’s maw bearing down on him, fangs poised to strike.

A glimmer of wetness at the corner of its eyes.

Shadow Milk takes in a shuddering breath; the vision dissolves, melting away as reality reforms around him. His eyes remain shut, but he can feel the night air creeping back along his dough, can hear his own heartbeat thudding painfully in his ears. Pure Vanilla’s hold on him has not lessened, the warmth of the other’s body a warped form of solace as Shadow Milk buries his face deeper into the other’s shoulder.

“Why?” he croaks weakly.

The hand on his neck gives a gentle squeeze. “Because you are so much more than just a beast to be feared.”

Shadow Milk exhales, breaths rattling in his chest. “You fear me. I know you do.”

“Sometimes.” The hand reaches up, stroking gently through his hair. “Sometimes, it feels like you fear me, too.”

There is no answer to that; Shadow Milk can only stiffen as Pure Vanilla’s hand smooths across his forehead.

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues softly, “that does not change my desires. I do not long to be with you out of fear, Shadow Milk. My wish to remain at your side is born of conviction, not terror.” A pause. “And, because of that, I think there is still something I must apologize for.”

A flicker of curiosity, disbelief. “What?”

Pure Vanilla shifts; Shadow Milk can feel himself being gently readjusted, repositioned onto his side as he slumps against the other. The arm holding him is still warm, still tight – yet the other’s hand has dropped down to cradle Shadow Milk’s own. “Because I used that truth

against you.” A gentle squeeze. “I cloaked my deceit within it and hid my intentions in order to defeat you. It may have been necessary at the time, but it also means I cannot blame you for doubting the truth behind it now.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes flutter; his brow scrunches with a flicker of anger. “Liar. Truthless Recluse was never going to stay with me.”

Another squeeze. “No,” Pure Vanilla confirms, “Those words weren’t his truth. But they are mine.”

“Liar,” Shadow Milk repeats with a hiss; he plants his palm on Pure Vanilla’s chest, pushing himself off and upright to level a glare at the other. “You think your stupid, pretty little words are going to trick me again? I *don’t believe you*.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla’s hands come up, grasping gently at the palm shoving at his chest. “And for that, I am sorry.”

“Oh, *shut up*.” Shadow Milk wrenches his hand away, pushing himself up to stumble to his feet. “Really, Nilly? This is the best you’ve got? Some half-hearted pity party in hopes I’ll go back to playing pretend with you?” Shadow Milk sways uneasily; the room spins in his vision, even as he focuses on pinning the other with his sneer. “I’m well aware of what you think of me.”

“I don’t think you are.” Pure Vanilla is also getting to his feet, leaning on his staff yet revoltingly steady as he straightens up to meet Shadow Milk’s glare. “Or you would know that I have already forgiven you for my time in the spire.”

Shadow Milk’s sneer deepens. “*Liar*.”

“Was it not you,” Pure Vanilla replies calmly, “that said one must become more comfortable with ugly truths?”

“You dream of it,” Shadow Milk snarls, “I saw. I *know*.”

“I do.” Pure Vanilla’s affirmation is effortless, unflinching. “Forgiving you does not mean I have forgotten. It does not mean I was not affected.”

“So, what?” Shadow Milk sweeps a mocking hand out; the room tilts dangerously before he swiftly catches his breath. “That’s it? You just – forgive me. Just like that. And you-” Shadow Milk barks a laugh. “You expect me to believe that? Have your lies really grown that revoltingly pathetic?”

Pure Vanilla’s gaze travels over Shadow Milk with unnerving calm; Shadow Milk bares his teeth in reply. Pure Vanilla cocks his head consideringly, then remarks:

“Do you remember the trick you played on me outside the spire’s gates?”

Shadow Milk blinks, recoiling slightly. “What?”

“With the soldier.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze remains steady, eyes lidding slightly. “He was crumbling and I... I promised he would be alright. Even though there was no hope, I lied, because I believed that lie would bring more comfort than the truth in his final moments.”

A swallow; a nervous grin. “Hah! Took that one to heart, did we?”

“Of all your tricks, that was the first one that truly made me feel like you understood me.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze flicks momentarily up to his staff. “Your illusion was not the first time I have weathered those moments, nor will it likely be the last.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “What’s your point?”

Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches up, touching his brooch. “I have cared for and lost many on the field of battle and beyond. I have struggled to the point of breaking to heal that which I could not, to fight an unwinnable battle in the hopes of saving my loved ones, or another’s.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze travels across the room, milky eyes unfocused and furrowed. “And yet, even for all my failures, I was forgiven. By those who crumbled in my arms, by their families who knew they had fallen in my defense. I remember their faces well – every single Cookie I was too weak to save, and those who had to go on without them.”

A beat of silence; Shadow Milk’s shoulders tense, bracing as Pure Vanilla’s gaze lifts back to him. “So?” he hisses, in a voice far too unsteady for his liking.

“They forgave me. All of them, without a second thought. Yet I have never forgiven myself.” Pure Vanilla’s lips twitch into a half-smile, small and sad. “Not even now.”

Shadow Milk’s hands ball into fists. “What are you asking for? My pity? My *understanding*? What is your *point*?”

“My point,” Pure Vanilla replies simply, “is that it is easier to forgive another than it is to forgive oneself.”

Silence stretches between them once more.

Shadow Milk averts his eyes, an ugly pulse echoing in his Soul Jam. “You’re an old fool.”

“Perhaps.” Pure Vanilla takes a step forward; Shadow Milk unconsciously finds himself taking a half-step back. “Though,” Pure Vanilla continues, “may I ask you something?”

A scoff; Shadow Milk is still looking anywhere but him. “You know, it’s rude to ask about things you’re going to do anyway.”

“A fair point,” Pure Vanilla hums; Shadow Milk can perfectly picture the revolting smile on his face. “Very well. Then, tell me this. If I had struck you that night – would you have found that fair?”

Shadow Milk snaps his gaze back up to the other, brow furrowing instantly. “Excuse me?”

“If I had struck you,” Pure Vanilla repeats, “would that have been fair?” He tilts his head, expression suddenly deadly serious. “You manipulated me, tortured me. You made me doubt

everything I was and broke me down to serve you in submission. Even at your kindest, your cruelty was beyond measure.”

Another step back; Shadow Milk’s teeth grit, bracing as Pure Vanilla simply moves forward, instantly closing the distance.

“Tell me,” Pure Vanilla continues, gaze searching, “if I had treated you with the same cruelty, what then? If I had struck you, banished you, harmed you in all the same ways you did me – would you feel you have grounds to object?”

“I’d like to see you try,” Shadow Milk snarls back.

“I’m sure you would.” Pure Vanilla straightens, serious expression softening into something unnervingly calm. “However, I am not threatening you. I am simply saying that if I would have been within my rights to treat you with cruelty…” A small smile. “Then it is also within my rights to treat you with kindness.”

Shadow Milk huffs a breathless laugh. “That’s worse.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla’s head tilts, gentle gaze lingering even as Shadow Milk averts his own. “I know I am placing a far greater burden on you than you’ve ever desired. Yet, I must insist on asking.” His hand comes up, touching his chest as his smile deepens into open fondness. “Shadow Milk, will you please bear the cruelty of my kindness?”

Another laugh – more and more, spilling from his chest as Shadow Milk shakes his head, hands coming up to tangle in his hair. “You’re-” he laughs, choking on the words, “such a *fool*.”

“Perhaps.” Pure Vanilla’s reaching out, placing a hand on his shoulder; Shadow Milk shudders at the touch. “Then, let me be foolish.”

“You’re-” Shadow Milk is gasping for breath now, words stuttered along hysterical giggles bubbling in his throat. “Oh, you’re m-making a *mistake*.”

“Perhaps,” Pure Vanilla repeats; his other hand reaches up, cradling Shadow Milk’s cheek with dizzying tenderness. “Then, let me make that mistake.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes clench shut; his hands cover his face. He doesn’t want to look, can’t look. He feels sick, feverish – his stomach twists like writhing snakes as he sways on his feet, even as Pure Vanilla’s hands brace him in place. He feels cold, shivering from the sensation while Pure Vanilla’s presence burns before him.

“This will happen again,” Shadow Milk whispers hoarsely.

A gentle hum. “I know.”

“I’ll keep hurting you.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla’s hand brushes gently along his cheek. “I’m afraid I’ll keep hurting you too. But we have forever to get it right.”

Shadow Milk barks another laugh; it is pain itself, ripping from his throat as he clutches desperately at his face. “I’m so tired,” he rasps, voice more warble than hiss, “of this. All of this.”

“Then come to bed.”

A blink; Shadow Milk feels his wrists being grasped, his hands gently lowered from his face. He stares wordlessly back at Pure Vanilla’s tender smile, face slack in sheer disbelief.

“*What?*”

“Come to bed,” Pure Vanilla repeats softly. “You look exhausted. Have you slept?”

“I-” Shadow Milk blinks again, the edges of hysteria receding through sheer incredulity. “No? That’s not-” He shakes his head, trying to gather his suddenly scattered thoughts.

“I haven’t slept well either.” Pure Vanilla’s still watching him, head tilted to the side with a small smile. “I keep having terrible dreams.”

Shadow Milk stiffens.

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues gently with a firm squeeze to Shadow Milk’s wrists. “I think I have a solution to that.”

A swallow; an uneasy glance away as Shadow Milk considers his options. Refusal and curiosity battle inside him, swirling darkly in his chest – in the end, curiosity wins out. “What?”

“On the night you returned,” Pure Vanilla says gently, “I had that same dream. But...” His smile deepens, ever so slightly. “I found that this time, upon waking, the nightmare could not keep its hold on my heart as it has so many other sleepless nights.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes flutter shut. He knows the answer, knows what the other will say – yet the question still tumbles hoarsely past his lips. “Why?”

“Because you were there, sleeping peacefully beside me.” Pure Vanilla’s grasp on Shadow Milk’s wrists release, only to come up and encircle him as Shadow Milk is limply tugged into another hug. “Because,” Pure Vanilla sighs into Shadow Milk’s neck, “I know you don’t truly wish to harm me anymore.”

The anger is reflexive, immediate; Shadow Milk’s hands curl as bitter rage pulses in his Soul Jam – even as nauseating, shuddering sorrow blankets over him in the next breath. His hands come up, clutching desperately at Pure Vanilla’s robes as he buries his face in the other’s shoulder. The shivers wracking his body feel at odds with the feverish desperation curling in his jam; Shadow Milk’s teeth bare, sinking uselessly into the fabric bunched at Pure Vanilla’s collar.

Shadow Milk hates him.

He hates him, *hates him*, ***hates him***.

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of Shadow Milk's cheek. "Come to bed," he murmurs gently.

Shadow Milk clenches his eyes shut, digging his claws in as he exhales pure, raw, all-consuming hatred - before finally, finally rasping back:

"Okay."

Chapter 12

Shadow Milk drifts in and out of consciousness for the next several days.

He doesn't remember their trip up to Pure Vanilla's bedroom; his hazy recognition of his surroundings comes in waves, a vague familiarity in the plush pillows beneath his head or the heavy comforter tucked up to his chin. The sheets carry that same soft, vanilla scent he's grown uncomfortably accustomed to – to say nothing of its bearer, who has been found sitting beside him each time Shadow Milk reluctantly opens his eyes.

Pure Vanilla has not left his side once; rather, if he has, Shadow Milk has not been awake enough to notice. Each drowsy flutter of his eyes reveals the other laying in bed beside him – sometimes dozing in the afternoon sun, sometimes sitting up in bed and reading, writing, knitting. Each time Shadow Milk rouses himself to half-wakefulness he draws the other's attention, earning him a gentle touch to his cheek or a murmured greeting and smile.

There are – half-conversations, at best. Shadow Milk is often far too fatigued to give anything more than meager grunts before rolling over and slipping away again.

It doesn't stop Pure Vanilla from prying, however.

“Are you alright?” is questioned, concern tangible even as a hand smooths through Shadow Milk's hair.

Shadow Milk is, and he isn't. While sleep has always been optional, there is a pleasure to be found in its indulgence – especially when suffering from such a putrid lack of it. Yet the ache in his dough feels deeper, filtering down to his very core as his heavy sigh earns him another brush through his hair.

Distantly, there's a begrudging acknowledgement that this body isn't meant for such extreme transformations. His true self, dough sealed away where even the darkest of magics cannot reach, had been perfectly suited for whatever forms he'd wished. There's been no resistance, no pain in flitting between all shapes and sizes, monstrous or otherwise. Yet the shell he inhabits of Dark Enchantress Cookie's own making, while passable, still lacks the finesse of a Witch's touch. It is a bitter reminder to feel such exhaustion from what had once been as simple as breathing – that he is incomplete, a fraction of what he could be. Should be.

However, giving voice to all this is far more effort than it's worth; all he gives Pure Vanilla in reply is a muffled grunt as he turns over onto his side and settles back down again. There's a hum and a gentle squeeze to his shoulder before Shadow Milk is drifting off back into slumber.

It is, annoyingly, not the last time he's prodded for response.

Far too often his fleeting flickers of consciousness are exacerbated by Pure Vanilla's voice, dragging him from the edges of sleep right into an irritable half-wakefulness. The other's touch is far too familiar, too comfortable with helping prop Shadow Milk upright in bed as he

sways sleepily from the motion. Gentle hands brushing the hair back from his face as another, tinier pair places a silver tray piled high with food in his lap, accompanied by the sounds of dresses swishing about the room.

Every so often Shadow Milk glimpses the hazy outlines of the Neapolitan sisters at the corners of his vision; mercifully, he only needs to bare his teeth to get them to quickly scamper out of sight.

The food is – not terrible, though Shadow Milk has little interest in it. He takes a handful of begrudging bites, a small appeasement before trying to flop back down; yet Pure Vanilla's hands stubbornly catch him every time, coaxing him back up with gentle words of encouragement.

"Come on." There's a plate of Candy Pasta on the tray, steam wafting from its glittering, pink strands. Pure Vanilla's gaze is gentled, his tone revoltingly patient. "A few more bites. You need to eat."

"*You* need to eat," is grumbled back under Shadow Milk's breath. He cracks open one eye in full, shooting Pure Vanilla an irritable glare. "Bet you haven't."

Pure Vanilla blinks in surprise; he tilts his head, considering. "I – suppose not, no."

Shadow Milk turns away, already trying to settle back down, but Pure Vanilla hand stubbornly catches his arm. Shadow Milk groans – loud, angry, in no mood – but Pure Vanilla's grasp is firm.

"I'll eat too." Pure Vanilla's tone is one full of promise as he gently guides Shadow Milk back up. "Alright? You take a bite, I'll take a bite."

"Get your own fork," Shadow Milk mutters; his drowsiness softens his glare far more than he'd like. Still, he snatches the utensil up from the tray, irritably jabbing it into the pasta.

"Apologies. There's only one."

A scoff. "I don't want your germs."

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. "Can you even get sick?"

"Sick of you," Shadow Milk mumbles back, sullenly stuffing the fork into his mouth. The remark earns him a laugh, even as Pure Vanilla reaches to take the offending utensil from his hand.

"Fair enough."

They trade a few bites back and forth; Shadow Milk makes a face each time, but he finishes more than half of the meal before dropping the fork back onto the plate and finally, *finally* rolling back over onto his side. There's another huffed laugh, the sounds of the tray being removed and tiny little feet hurrying away with clinking dishes; then the weight on the mattress dips and Pure Vanilla settles down beside him. A *thank you* is murmured in his ear;

there's a gentle brush against his cheek that Shadow Milk ignores, already slipping back into the blissful reprieve of slumber.

The food, surprisingly, does seem to help.

The next time Shadow Milk is roused to full wakefulness it's by his own accord; he blinks spots from his vision as his eyes open to a patterned ceiling and the sounds of birds chirping through an open window. He shifts in bed, pushing himself up on his elbows as he gazes blearily around the room; it feels overly warmed, no doubt due to what looks to be the afternoon sun peeking in through curtains that have - perhaps considerably - been drawn half-shut.

Unsurprisingly, Pure Vanilla is still sitting next to him; the other's lap is covered in papers, a half-crumpled document in hand. His gaze is focused sharply ahead, perusing line by line while he nibbles absently on the tip of his feathered quill.

The sight of it draws a strange flicker of warmth in Shadow Milk's chest; he shakes his head, tossing aside the sensation even as the movement draws Pure Vanilla's gaze to him.

"Oh! You're awake." Pure Vanilla sets his page down, looking Shadow Milk over. "How are you feeling? Are you hungry?"

"Calm down," Shadow Milk sighs, reaching up a hand to rub at his eyes. "What's with all the papers? You have a desk."

"Just finishing up." Pure Vanilla reaches down, scooting some of the papers into a neater pile. "There was a trade agreement request I couldn't ignore any longer."

Shadow Milk glances to the curtains, then back at the other. "Isn't it the middle of the afternoon? Why aren't you playing puppet-king in those insufferable little meetings of yours?"

"I declined the offers." A shrug; Pure Vanilla's picked up another page, scanning over the header. "I am only ever asked to sit in on them. I do not have to."

A sigh; Shadow Milk flops back into the pillows, arms stretched out on either side. "So you're just laying in bed all day instead?"

Pure Vanilla tucks the corner of a page before replying: "I go where the need is greatest."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "Oh, please. I'm not *dying*. I don't *need* you here."

"I didn't say it was your need."

A suspicious glance upwards; Pure Vanilla's expression is perfectly neutral, eyes locked on his pages. Another roll of his eyes as Shadow Milk runs his hands over his face, gaze drifting vacantly up to the ceiling overhead.

"What'd you tell them, anyway?"

Pure Vanilla glances down. “Hm?”

“Those pesky gnats in the halls.” Shadow Milk waves a hand vaguely. “Your *dignitaries*. You never did tell me how you lured them back here. What, doing bribes now?”

“Lured?” Pure Vanilla’s surprise sounds genuine. “They were the ones scrabbling at my gates to be allowed back in. Keeping them out was the difficult part.”

Shadow Milk returns Pure Vanilla’s curious gaze with a disbelieving glance of his own. “So, what? Neglect to tell them a Beast would be roaming the halls, then?” He grins, all teeth. “It’s fun to make them float. They make such *delightful* little squeals.”

Pure Vanilla looks him over, curiosity fading into an amused smile. “I was perfectly honest with them. I announced that I was hosting a guest of unimaginable power with a penchant for trickery, from whom I could in no way guarantee their immediate safety should they cross his path.”

Shadow Milk blinks; truthful, if not a bit overly blunt. “And?”

“And,” Pure Vanilla continues, turning back to his papers, “they asked me if Ballroom C could be re-opened a week earlier.”

Shadow Milk narrows his gaze in disbelief. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Pure Vanilla gives him another amused glance. “I’m sad to say that despite our fabled pasts, you and I amount to little more than obstacles against the might of would-be political conferences.”

A snort; Shadow Milk closes his eyes, letting the warmth of the room and the presence beside him settle into his dough. “My, my. Seems I’ll have to try so, so, *so* much harder to make an impression on them, then. Can’t be upstaged by a bunch of dreary suits, can we?”

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance.” Pure Vanilla shifts in the bed, setting a stack of papers aside on the nightstand. “I’m afraid I’ll have to return to the halls tomorrow anyway. As pleasant as the break has been, the Crème Republic delegation waits for no Cookie.”

Crème Republic... the name drifts through Shadow Milk’s mind, before a revoltingly bright smile sifts forth from his memories. Ah, yes. That puffed-up peacock. And the crone.

Shadow Milk yawns loudly, stretching his arms above his head. “Going to miss lazing around in bed all day?”

“Quite.” Pure Vanilla’s smile is unflinching. “It is not often I have a perfectly valid excuse to do so.”

“Lazy.”

“I,” Pure Vanilla hums, “have not been the one asleep for three days.”

“Do you know how *exhausting* it is being me?” Shadow Milk lifts his hand again in a lazy wave. “To put up with *you*? You’re lucky it’s not a week.”

“So you are feeling better, then?”

“Eh. I’ll be fine by tomorrow.” He does feel more energized, more himself. The few minutes of wakefulness feel clearer than he’s felt in days; whatever extended rest this body had demanded, it seems he’s at the tail end of it. “But I may sleep in again, just in case.”

“Just in case,” Pure Vanilla repeats, amusement tangible. “My. And I’m the lazy one?”

Shadow Milk shrugs easily. “Maybe I just want the bed all to myself. You take up too much room.” A pause. “And you snore.”

Pure Vanilla frowns. “I do not. And, may I point out that this is *my* bed?”

Another shrug. “I didn’t tell you to bring me here.”

“Your bed,” Pure Vanilla retorts calmly, “is on the ceiling.”

Shadow Milk flutters his lashes. “Skill issue.”

“What?”

A yawn as Shadow Milk turns over onto his side. “I don’t know,” he admits sleepily. “Heard it from some of those little brats running around in the streets. Did I use it right?”

“I,” Pure Vanilla replies with a laugh, “have no idea.”

“Old man.”

A gentle poke to Shadow Milk’s side. “Bedbug.”

“Quiet.” Shadow Milk burrows deeper into the covers. “I’m resting.”

“Again?”

Shadow Milk shushes him, a long drawled sound that earns him another huffed laugh from the other. There’s the sound of rustling papers, Pure Vanilla bending back over his work as the weight on the mattress shifts once more.

The quiet that settles over the room is pleasantly comfortable; it’s not long before Shadow Milk finds himself drifting back into peaceful slumber. His last, fleeting thought is that of the light scent of vanilla wafting from his pillows – and how warm he feels with every inhale.

Perhaps he’d better sleep for another two days.

Just in case.

Shadow Milk is running again.

There's no light on his heels this time, no swaying treetops or perfect darkness to throw himself into. The sky is ablaze in a furious red, flames licking at rooftops as smoke chokes the air. The blackened haze is too great; he can barely see, ducking around street corners as his footsteps echo heavily across the cobblestones. The screams and cries all around him rise and fall in waves of shrieking, wails cutting through the air in a sick symphony of anguish and despair –

His doing. His fault.

Bodies lie crumbled at his feet as he runs; the city morphs and sways around him, fragments of time and place shattering with each step. He sprints past rows and rows of statues that flicker between the pristine calm of Pure Vanilla's eternal grace, only to morph into his own twisting sneer bearing down upon him.

The resounding clang of metal hitting stone; spears falling from the sky, striking inches from where he'd stood one step before. He runs and runs but he can hear the rattling at his heels, can glimpse the glinting silver chains slithering up faster than he can move. Time slows all around him as he struggles to take a single step more, reaching out helplessly in the dark as the chains wrap tight around his neck -

A gasp. Painfully loud, rasped from a raw throat as Shadow Milk shoots straight up in bed.

It's – still light out. It's the first thing that comes to mind as Shadow Milk grasps at his chest, heart still hammering out an unforgiving staccato that drives the breaths from him in heaving gasps. His Soul Jam feels aflame, twisting painfully as Shadow Milk doubles over, clutching at his face as he sucks in breath through gritted teeth.

A dream. A wretched, unforgiveable dream – but a dream nonetheless.

The second thing that slowly filters through his mind is that the mattress feels lighter than before.

When Shadow Milk's hands finally drop, he casts a tired gaze to his side – to find that Pure Vanilla is noticeably absent. It's strange how unnatural it feels, to look over at empty pillows, to not feel that annoyingly persistent presence at his side after so long. Even stranger, despite the multitude of blankets piled high on the bed and the sun streaming in through the windows, the room feels decidedly colder than before.

Dimly, Shadow Milk recalls the other's remarks about leaving for the day before – something about the Crème Republic? No doubt for another tedious meeting Shadow Milk has no interest in; nothing he needs to concern himself with at any rate.

Shadow Milk tugs the covers up to his chin, flopping back down into the pillows as he scrunches his eyes shut. His heartbeat still drums unhappily in his chest, still quickens his breaths – but Shadow Milk has no intention of letting some pathetic half-memory claim victory over him. He rolls onto his side, bundling himself up tight as he buries his face deeper into the pillows.

The clock's steady ticking echoes in the empty room, the only sound breaking the relative silence that's settling back into place. Outside, a bird caws; there's a ruffling of wings, the sound of a branch swaying in the wind as it takes off.

Shadow Milk is cold.

Irritably he pulls the covers tighter; he squirms down beneath them, tugging the covers over his head as he burrows into a cocoon of blankets. His own body heat is meager at best, sure – yet there still should be *something* retained in this mass of sheets. The air within the room itself is passably warm enough, the sun doing its best to keep the chill of the room's shadows at bay; yet even when curling himself into a ball, absolutely burying himself beneath the mountain of covers he's created –

Shadow Milk is still cold.

With a scowl he violently throws off the covers; the sheets drop limply to the floor as Shadow Milk sits upright in bed and stares venomously at nothing in particular. With or without the sheets, the feeling is unchanged – and Shadow Milk has a nasty suspicion of why.

As if to mock him, his Soul Jam gives a gentle pulse in reply.

Spoiled. That's the only word for it. However many days with Pure Vanilla all cozied up against him has ruined whatever passes for normal in a shell like this. The other's perpetual body heat has thrown his own for a loop; the regular lack of warmth Shadow Milk had grown so easily accustomed to is now off-kilter. Unbalanced.

Spoiled.

With an aggravated groan Shadow Milk lifts off the bed; he wobbles slightly, even something as natural as floating feeling slightly askew after such a long rest. He rubs at his eyes, scowl deepening as he massages his temples, feeling the first edges of a headache coming on. He should just go back to sleep – hadn't that been nice? Blissful unconsciousness? Not having to think about his where and when, not having to notice that Pure Vanilla has once again ruined something for him?

Will you please bear the cruelty of my kindness?

Shadow Milk exhales a long sigh; his hands drop tiredly from his face as he gazes down at the floor below. The chill seeping into his dough is relentless, prickling at the edges of his limbs even as Shadow Milk unconsciously rubs at his arm.

Unfortunately, he knows exactly what he needs to do.

That doesn't mean he has to like it.

The shadows welcome him back with open arms; Shadow Milk slides along them like the ripples in water as he makes his way through the cracks of the castle. Pure Vanilla's room lies at the topmost spire, but the trip down doesn't take too terribly long. Shadow Milk has to be thorough anyway – he's not exactly sure which room will hold what he's looking for.

A few more minutes of drifting along through the darkness nets him new movement, a clamor of voices that ebb and flow along the currents of air. Shadow Milk traces his path through the walls, slipping down through the arches of a high ceiling before his path abruptly halts. Below him is a small ballroom – though it's most certainly grand enough for its humble size. Stained sugar-glass windows cast multicolored hues across marbled floors; fine drapes and grandiose paintings line the walls in neat little rows. Most notably there is a large, oval table centered in the middle with Cookies seated all around its edges, passionately arguing back and forth. Sitting calmly at its head is –

Ah. There.

It's a short jaunt down to the floor, a few quick flits between the shadows of the drapes until he's safely beneath the table. As Shadow Milk crawls along the wooden underbelly, there's a few close calls – some shifting legs, some angry slaps of hands that jostle him from above. It doesn't take long, however, until he's sliding his way up the tallest chair's legs to his prize.

The beckoning darkness of Pure Vanilla's cloak is a blissful reprieve; Shadow Milk at least has enough dignity to muffle his sigh of relief as he melts back into its warm embrace.

There's a bit of rearranging, some shuffling as he settles back into the groove between Pure Vanilla's shoulders. His Soul Jam pulses contentedly as he nestles down, his wispy form curling around itself in contentment. Shadow Milk lets his eyes flutter once; already, the pleasant warmth is pulling him away, dragging him back into the peaceful depths of slumber.

“Why, hello there.”

The murmured greeting is soft, barely above a whisper; still Shadow Milk's eyes snap open in surprise. He stills, gaze flicking up as Pure Vanilla shifts in place. A beat of silence passes before a small chuckle reverberates down Pure Vanilla's back, jostling Shadow Milk with the movement.

“I know you're there.” Hushed amusement, the other's smile perfectly visible in Shadow Milk's mind. “Finally out of bed, are we?”

How did he-?

Shadow Milk's Soul Jam pulses happily; there's a reverberation from Pure Vanilla's own in reply.

Ah. Right.

A scoff; Shadow Milk stubbornly settles right back down. “Your room is *freezing*,” he mutters under his breath. “You’re a terrible host, you know that?”

“Is it?” Pure Vanilla hums; his voice remains soft, barely audible as the other Cookies at the table continue bickering loudly back and forth. “It felt pleasant when I left this morning.”

“Freezing,” Shadow Milk repeats sullenly. “Get a fireplace or something.”

Pure Vanilla cocks his head; Shadow Milk can feel himself shift along the other’s shoulder blades. “Could you not have simply conjured one?”

A pause.

“I’m resting.”

“Poor thing.”

“Be quiet.” Shadow Milk pinches at the dough beneath him, earning a small squeak in reply. “Now leave me alone. I’m going back to sleep.”

“That may be difficult,” Pure Vanilla hums; he lifts his arms, folding his hands on the table. “I don’t foresee my guests quieting down anytime soon.”

Shadow Milk cracks open an eye; while the clamor of the other Cookies had been a background din at best, there’s a detestable note of truth to Pure Vanilla’s remark. The shouting is growing steadily louder, angrier – more slams on the desk, more back and forths that seem to be taking on a decidedly personal nature.

Politics. He has not missed this.

Shadow Milk stretches briefly before slithering up to rest atop the curve of Pure Vanilla’s shoulder. He lazily eyes the Cookies bickering back and forth; while the bulk of them are largely unremarkable, he can pick out the familiar shine of Clotted Cream Cookie sitting near the back. Annoyingly, the other’s perfect smile is still firmly in place – even if his eyes are darkened by a slightly furrowed brow.

Seems the fighting’s getting to the prince of puffery too.

Shadow Milk huffs a sigh, watching the back and forth with little interest. “What exactly are these gnats sniping at each other about?”

“A small island recently located far off the coast.” Pure Vanilla leans back in his chair. “Lush, uninhabited. Full of valuable resources.”

“In whose waters?”

“That,” Pure Vanilla replies with a click of his tongue, “is what they have been debating for the last five hours.”

Five *hours*? “Sheesh. Why don’t you just get up and leave? It’s not like they can stop you.” Shadow Milk lifts a shadowy tendril, prodding at Pure Vanilla’s cheek. “Come on. You seriously want to be here?”

“Not really. I have little to add.” Pure Vanilla lifts a hand, casually batting away the tendril as if shooing a fly. “Unfortunately, this is important. Tensions were already high between the delegates before the meeting even began. Even if I only sit here as a figurehead, if I excuse myself, it will only worsen their tempers.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Puppet-king.”

“Some days,” Pure Vanilla hums. “It can feel like that, yes.”

Another lazy glance around the room as Shadow Milk watches the other Cookies continue their row. He’s catching snippets here and there, some ridiculous claims of sovereignty and homelands and other such nonsense. Nothing of interest, save for the map they keep gesturing to centered at the table. There’s a large swathe of red encircling a small pinprick of land; judging by just how much pointing is going on, that must be the island itself.

“Pretty small thing to be raising such a big fuss,” Shadow Milk remarks off-handedly.

Pure Vanilla’s mouth opens – then swiftly clamps shut. His eyes glitter with sudden amusement, even as Shadow Milk shoots him a suspicious stare.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Pure Vanilla says smoothly, face lapsing back into practiced neutrality.

Shadow Milk continues staring at him, eyes slowly narrowing into a glare. He digs his claws in, earning the tiniest wince from the other. “I,” he says dangerously, “can be taller than you any time I want.”

The corner of Pure Vanilla’s lips twitch, ever so slightly. “I didn’t say a thing.”

“You thought it.”

A smile, in full this time. There’s no other reply, just Pure Vanilla’s gaze sliding smoothly back to the delegates bickering around him.

Another few minutes pass; the clamoring voices don’t settle for a moment, trading blows as swiftly as their rapidly hoarsening voices allow. Shadow Milk’s eyes have fluttered once or twice, still lounging against the curve of Pure Vanilla’s throat – but each time he begins slipping away, another, rowdier voice cuts through the din and startles him awake again.

One, in particular, is getting on his nerves.

“Pure Vanilla Cookie!” The name is barked from a tall, swarthy fellow; gleaming badges decorate his chest, glinting in the light as Shadow Milk squints irritably. “Come now! You must see that Crème Republic has the clearest claims to this land!”

“Calm yourself, Lebkuchen Cookie,” a spindly, bespectacled Cookie hisses. “That is no way to speak to our host.” A simpering smile is directed Pure Vanilla’s way; Shadow Milk wrinkles his nose in distaste. “My apologies for his lack of manners, Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“Oh, go stuff yourself back in your dusty old books, Tirggel Cookie!” the other Cookie barks back. “You Parfaedian types are all the same!”

“Lebkuchen Cookie...” It’s surprising to hear Clotted Cream Cookie’s voice join the fray; though his impeccable smile has yet to falter, his tone carries open warning.

“My apologies, my friends.” Pure Vanilla Cookie’s voice carries clearly; the rest of the room quiets instantly as he speaks. “The Vanilla Kingdom has no jurisdiction over these waters. I am here to mediate only.”

“Then mediate!” Lebkuchen Cookie’s thick arms fly up in frustration. “Can’t you see how ridiculous these claims are! This island lies clearly within our shipping lanes!”

“But not,” Tirggel Cookie snaps back, “within your borders. The island is clearly situated closer to Parfaedian lands, and should lie within our purview, not yours.”

More arguing, more voices raising into shouts as Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. Beneath him, Pure Vanilla shifts uncomfortably; Shadow Milk can’t help but find his gaze drifting down to the other’s staff, now held tightly in Pure Vanilla’s hands.

Something sharp prickles in Shadow Milk’s chest.

“Pure Vanilla Cookie!” The name is barked like a threat, thundering across the hall. “Say something! Speak in our defense!”

Pure Vanilla’s hands twist tightly around his staff. “That is not-”

“Lebkuchen Cookie.” Sharp displeasure laces Clotted Cream Cookie’s words as he pushes himself up from the table. “Enough.”

Lebkuchen Cookie is unmoved, unswayed – he points a massive, gauntleted hand square in Pure Vanilla’s direction as he bellows a furious: “Were you our king or not?!”

Clotted Cream Cookie’s eyes narrow, mouth opening sharply –

An explosion of darkness bursts out across the room.

Black paints the walls, the floors, chokes out the ceilings as the lamps are snuffed out in quick, beheaded succession. A startled clamor rises from the table, Cookies scrambling to their feet as they turn their heads this way and that, trying to peer through the darkness swallowing up the room in its entirety. The sole remaining light shines from the glimmering beacon of Pure Vanilla’s staff, casting long shadows across the table that stretch across shocked, horrified faces-

“Well looky, looky, *looky*!”

Shadow Milk's voice shakes the room with its presence; documents clatter to the floor as the chandeliers above sway dangerously. The delegates are bracing, hands coming up to clap over their ears from the sheer volume; their frightened gazes are drawn up, up into the darkness painted over the ceiling as Shadow Milk's massive, wicked grin twists into view. His eyes blink into existence one by one, before narrowing with mirth as the congregation below lets out a collective gasp.

Ah, a captive audience. Always a treat.

"*Looky* at all these *Cookies!*" Shadow Milk's gaze travels over the crowd one by one, savoring the horror, the fear – the look of mild affront on Clotted Cream Cookie's face. "You know, I was having such a nice nap. But you all make *quite* the racket! Looking for attention, are we?"

"Pure Vanilla Cookie!" Tirggel Cookie is flinching away, hand on his chest as he glances wildly around. "Pure Vanilla Cookie, what is-?"

Shadow Milk finally turns his gaze to Pure Vanilla himself – and finds he's being met with an apprehensive stare. Pure Vanilla's expression is guarded, hands tight on his staff; bracing, but not hostile. Not yet. He remains seated where the others have stood, meeting Shadow Milk's teasing smile with tense reservation.

"What is this?!" Lebkuchen Cookie roars, pawing wildly at the darkness. "Show yourself, fiend!"

"Ah, ah! Eager for the star of the show, are we?" Shadow Milk flings out another whirlwind of darkness, scattering what little papers remained; by the time it's settled, he's reformed his body above the table, hovering several feet in the air. Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his back, leaning forward as he gives his wide-eyed audience a wicked smile. "My, my, my! So many happy, smiling faces for little ol' me. Tell me, what's the occasion? Birthday party? Anniversary? Oh!" Shadow Milk claps his hands together; the room shakes from the impact, sending several Cookies stumbling. "Don't tell me – Arbor Day?"

"Shadow Milk Cookie."

Pure Vanilla's voice cuts through the clamor like a knife – instantly, the room is silenced once more. Shadow Milk turns towards him, cocking his head politely with his trademark grin in place; Pure Vanilla gazes back at him calmly, unflinching. There's a beat, a fragile moment that hangs between them as Pure Vanilla studies him closely, a deeply considering look in his eyes.

Shadow Milk gives him a wink; Pure Vanilla's brow perks imperceptibly, yet Shadow Milk can all but taste a fraction of tension leave the other's shoulders. Finally, Pure Vanilla lets his eyes slip shut, raising a hand to his chest in a half-bow. "Good evening, Shadow Milk Cookie. We are in the middle of discussions regarding a land dispute between Parfaedia and the Crème Republic." His eyes creak open again, a small tilt of his head. "Perhaps you have your own thoughts to share on the matter?"

"Him?" gawps Lebkuchen Cookie, jaw going slack. "You're asking this- this-"

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says smoothly, “is my guest. This information was given to your aides long before your arrival here last night.”

“But-”

“Considering his vast array of knowledge and millennia of experience, I would like to hear Shadow Milk Cookie’s input on the matter.” Pure Vanilla leans back in his chair, tilting his gaze back up to Shadow Milk in full. “If you feel so inclined, of course.”

“Aw!” Shadow Milk grins ear to ear, summoning his cap before sweeping into a full bow of his own. “But of course! Can’t keep such an eager audience waiting, can we? Especially not when you’re *so* politely asking for an encore!”

The rest of the room stands in silence, stunned; Tirrgel Cookie’s mouth is flapping open and closed like a fish as he clutches at his robes, while Lebkuchen Cookie’s face is turning a delightful shade of red. Only Clotted Cream Cookie stands with perfect poise, arms behind his back as he pins Shadow Milk with an equally appraising gaze.

Whatever. Can’t win them all.

“Well, let’s see here!” Shadow Milk flicks his cane up; the map, having been scattered to the floor, flutters up along invisible strings to hover just in front of Shadow Milk’s face. He makes a show of peering at it, hemming and hawing as he rubs his chin and tsks under his breath. He even gives the paper a good poke with his cane before turning an unimpressed gaze out across the crowd.

“Are you all talking about the Serpent Devil’s Isle?”

“The-” Tirrgel Cookie blinks, visibly taken aback. “The what?”

“Yes, Shadow Milk Cookie.” Pure Vanilla’s tone is surprisingly calm. “The what?”

“Oh, sure! The Serpent Devil’s Isle!” Shadow Milk prods the red circle on the map, a wide grin stretching across his face. “Great place! Lovely old curse on it too.”

“Curse?” Clotted Cream Cookie’s voice cuts in, brow furrowing. “Are you saying there’s a curse on the land?”

“Well...” Shadow Milk Cookie folds his arms behind his head, drifting on his back as he pretends to consider. “Not the land. Just good ol’ fangface Aneloby.” He waves a hand lazily. “You know, the *Serpent Devil*? Kind of what the place is named for. Sheesh, you guys are *slow*!”

“There’s no serpent on that isle!” Lebkuchen Cookie seems to have found his voice again, slamming his fist on the table. “We’ve combed it top to bottom!”

Shadow Milk flips over in the air, rolling his eyes for effect as he grins. “Well of course, silly! Not right now! Geez, you think I’m *that* bad at sealing portals?”

“Sealing portals?” Tirrgel Cookie echoes faintly.

“Sure! Call it a favor to Cookiekind, waaaaay back in the day. I sealed her away...” Shadow Milk pretends to count with quick bobs of his cane. “Hm! Well, actually it *has* been a while, hasn’t it? Gosh, she could just pop right on out of there any day now!”

Clotted Cream Cookie leans on the table, eyes scanning the floating map before flicking back over to Shadow Milk. “And how...” He clears his throat, visibly considering something before straightening his back. “How formidable a foe is this... Serpent Devil?”

Shadow Milk flicks his cane; in an instant, a massive black snake’s head appears above him. The sheer size of it dwarfs the room, glistening fangs extended in a snarl as the crowd of Cookies lets out a gasp of horror. Shadow Milk lowers his gaze, perking his brow as Clotted Cream Cookie visibly sucks in a breath. “Well,” Shadow Milk drawls, “this’d be the head. But I don’t think the body is gonna fit into this itty bitty space. So sad!”

Another wave of his cane and the head disappears, yet the stunned silence remains even as the last wisps of smoke fade out into the darkness. As the delegates turn to murmur amongst themselves, Shadow Milk sneaks a glance at Pure Vanilla – only to find the other watching him carefully with that same considering look. Shadow Milk flashes him another grin before turning back to the crowd.

“Well!” Shadow Milk claps his hands together; the room rumbles from the impact once more. “That’s my time, folks! Gotta run, but gotta say – looking forward to the *when*, not the *if* of her return! Keep me posted, hm?” He floats higher into the darkness, twirling his cane in his palm alongside a theatrical bow. “But, ah-” Shadow Milk straightens up, flashing a smile that is all teeth. “I do have one tiny, teensy favor to ask. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind **keeping it down** a bit? I do need my beauty sleep, after all!”

Shadow Milk then flicks his gaze to Pure Vanilla Cookie, eyes lidding slightly. “Your Majesty.”

If there’s a reaction to be had, Shadow Milk cannot glimpse it from here; Pure Vanilla simply closes his eyes and inclines his head politely in acknowledgement.

With a final wink, Shadow Milk melds back into the darkness above. A dramatic pause, a flick of his wrist and the black coating the room begins to ebb away, shrinking back along the walls as light slowly filters back in through the windows. As the rest of the Cookies mutter and turn their heads to watch, Shadow Milk flits along the receding shadows; it’s a simple matter to duck under their searching eyes and slip right back into the cover of Pure Vanilla’s cloak.

As Shadow Milk settles back into his usual spot, there’s a small thrum of curiosity; his Soul Jam hums pleasantly with their renewed proximity, but Pure Vanilla hasn’t given any sign that he’s noticed yet. Rather, the other seems oddly focused, watching carefully as the crowd murmurs amongst themselves. Finally, Clotted Cream Cookie clears his throat, turning the heads of the crowd and lifting Pure Vanilla’s gaze as well.

“Perhaps,” Clotted Cream Cookie remarks, surveying the room with a placidly calm smile. “We should turn our discussion towards a joint military endeavor instead. All in favor?”

There's a clamor of agreement; chairs scrape as Cookies begin taking their seats again, chattering amongst themselves. Their volume is muted, cautious – notes of trepidation and curiosity in full swing. Shadow Milk smirks to himself at the softened sounds, his eyes slipping shut as he lets out a satisfied huff.

Much better.

The meeting doesn't seem to last that much longer; Shadow Milk is dozing off peacefully when he's suddenly jostled by new motion. Pure Vanilla is getting to his feet, brushing off his robes as the clattering sound of receding footsteps fill the air. There's a shaking of hands, a flurry of farewells, some more prattle about reconvening that Shadow Milk largely tunes out as he repositions himself in the cloak. Pure Vanilla trades a few more pleasantries, dips into far too many half-bows for Shadow Milk's liking, and finally, finally is left alone in the empty ballroom as the last pair of footsteps recedes down the halls.

It is a little bit odd how quiet Pure Vanilla's been. Aside from speaking when spoken to by the delegates, the other hasn't made much of a peep since Shadow Milk's performance. Now he stands in silence, staring absently upwards at the ceiling – as if concentrating on something unseen. There's been no greeting, no indication whatsoever that Pure Vanilla's even aware of his presence.

Unacceptable.

Shadow Milk shifts in the cape, reaching out to form a claw that pokes into Pure Vanilla's side. "Hey."

No response – not verbally, anyway. There's a small start, an involuntary flinch from the touch; yet Pure Vanilla simply lowers his gaze down to the table, mind still apparently elsewhere.

Shadow Milk's brow furrows; he slips out from the cloak in full, reforming at the other's side. "Hey," he tries again, arms folded behind his back. "Hello? Earthbread to Nilly?"

Pure Vanilla's hand abruptly comes up to cover his mouth; his eyes avert as his head turns away from Shadow Milk in full.

Fresh annoyance sings in Shadow Milk's jam. "Seriously? What are you, pouting?" Shadow Milk's hands rise to his hips, scowl already forming. "Come on, that went great! You can't actually-"

A pause as Shadow Milk's gaze is sharply drawn down to Pure Vanilla's shoulders – shoulders that are shaking, shuddering as Pure Vanilla begins slightly bending into himself.

A bizarre reaction to be sure. Is Pure Vanilla sick? Nauseous? It'd explain the hand clasped over his mouth. Or is he truly that upset? Had it been the show? Certainly it had been theatrical – Shadow Milk is never anything else – but he hadn't hurt anyone.

Perhaps it had been too familiar. Too much darkness and teeth, too much – Shadow Milk.

Shadow Milk leans in closer, trying to peer at the other's face. "Nilly?" His tone is unconsciously softened, searching as he inquisitively prods the other. "Are you?"

An ugly snort rips through the air.

Shadow Milk blinks.

Pure Vanilla doubles over, shoulders trembling as a steady stream of muffled snickers fills the air. They're leaking out from behind the man's clasped hand, his eyes clenched shut as he shakes where he stands – yet when he reopens them, when he finally meets the searching gaze upon him, Shadow Milk can only stare in wonder at the tear-spotted mirth glittering in Pure Vanilla's eyes.

"Oh," Pure Vanilla huffs, a stuttering gasp as another giggle slips past his lips. "Oh, my. I'm sorry, Shadow Milk, I—" The hand comes up to clasp at his mouth again; Pure Vanilla looks away, shaking his head as he tries to hide the smile on his lips. "Oh, my goodness."

Shadow Milk peers down at him, staring in disbelief – before slow, budding glee starts tugging at the corners of his own lips. A fragile warmth is blooming in his chest, sending pleasant tickles through his jam. "Oh, *Pure Vanilla Cookie*."

"Don't," Pure Vanilla sighs, rubbing at his cheek. "Oh, I was so worried. I thought I'd slip in front of the delegates. You—" His smile widens, hand finally dropping from his face. "You are always full of surprises, aren't you?"

Shadow Milk leans in close, all grins. "You *liked* my show."

"Yes." Pure Vanilla exhales slowly, visibly trying to recompose himself even with the broad smile on his face. "Yes, I liked it."

"And here I thought you were giving me the cold shoulder!" Shadow Milk twirls in the air, flipping over and tilting his head to the side. "Oh, you're so cruel, Nilly! Holding out on my standing ovation, how could you?"

"You did have me worried for a bit." Pure Vanilla's looking him over again, clear amusement glittering in his eyes. "And you didn't need to go quite so far."

"I," Shadow Milk pronounces, hand flying to his chest, "am an *actor*. A playwright, a poet. A showman! Did you truly expect anything less?"

"I didn't know what to expect." Pure Vanilla's smile softens. "While I don't necessarily agree with you frightening my guests, I suppose they were fairly warned. And I cannot say I'm disappointed in the results. It has been quite some time since Parfaedia and the Crème Republic have managed to put their differences aside."

"Oh, please." Shadow Milk flips himself right-side up, rolling his eyes dramatically. "Other Cookies are so easy. Bicker, bicker, bicker until a Big Bad shows up. Then all of a sudden, insurmountable differences get pushed aside with a flick of a wrist! Really, such low-level manipulation is *barely* worth my time."

Pure Vanilla chuckles to himself. "I am to take it, then, that there is no Serpent's Devil waiting in the wings?"

"There is." Shadow Milk shrugs. "Just not there. And probably not reemerging for a couple thousand years or so." Shadow Milk extends a hand, pretending to inspect it for dirt. "Come on. You've met me. You think I'd be so sloppy in my spellwork as to let it lapse all willy-nilly? I'm hurt, truly."

"My apologies," Pure Vanilla hums; he extends his own hand upwards in offering. "May I make it up to you, Shadow Milk?"

"Maybe." Shadow Milk eyes the offending appendage with practiced indifference. "What do you have in mind?"

"A quiet dinner. A stroll through the gardens, if you're up for it. It's been quite some time since you've had fresh air."

Shadow Milk tilts his head, gaze drifting as he pretends to consider. "Hm. Hardly painting the town red with that offer."

"Well," Pure Vanilla replies demurely, "I thought we could take things slow to start."

My, my, my.

Shadow Milk perks a brow, a smile of his own twitching at his lips. "Hmph." He takes Pure Vanilla's hand, allows himself to be gently lowered through the air down to the other's eye level. "Very well. I suppose I should take the fact you're an old fool into account."

"How gracious." Pure Vanilla's smile is gentled, eyes soft and fond. "What would you like for dinner?"

"I'm not picky." Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder, casting his own appraising gaze over the other. "What about you? Have you eaten?"

Pure Vanilla gives him a curious look. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

"Why is your answer always no?"

A beat of silence; a sigh as Pure Vanilla dips his head in defeat. "You're making a point."

"I usually am." Shadow Milk lifts his free hand, flicking the brim of Pure Vanilla's crown. "And a good one at that."

"So it seems." Pure Vanilla motions to the door with his staff. "Shall we go eat then?"

"Fine." Shadow Milk finally releases Pure Vanilla's hand, folding his arms behind his back as he drifts alongside the other. "I do have one rule, though."

"Oh?" Pure Vanilla glances over.

“It’s very important,” Shadow Milk drawls. “You can’t break it.”

“Really?” Pure Vanilla’s footsteps slow; he turns, giving Shadow Milk his attention in full.
“What is it?”

Shadow Milk leans forward, tapping the tip of his cane to Pure Vanilla’s forehead.

“Use your *own* fork this time.”

Chapter 13

Shadow Milk Cookie has never been one to keep to a schedule.

He had, in the past, had some sort of outline for his days, but that notion had been long discarded the moment he'd cast off his wretched former self. Ever since he's enjoyed his freedom to the fullest, his ability to choose capriciously when and where he wants to be – utter contentment in drifting along his own whims without a single responsibility weighing him down. But now his days feel so busy; it's unintentional, nothing he's written out in stone – yet it feels suddenly as if he has a sort of inner timetable he's suddenly found himself working off of.

Once he wakes half-past noon, of course.

After rising, it's much of the same – a brisk yawn, a vigorous stretch and some form of breakfast snatched from the kitchens. Once he's eaten, once he's terrorized whatever dreary little Cookie gapes at him for too long in the halls, Shadow Milk finds himself again and again drifting through the corridors in idle pursuit of the same all-too familiar prey.

He has found, to his delight, that he quite likes sitting in on Pure Vanilla's meetings.

The draw is certainly aided by the lush warmth of Pure Vanilla's cloak, a perfect napping spot to while away the hours when he so chooses. Yet much of his time is spent wide awake, perched in the shadows of Pure Vanilla's shoulder as he listens to other Cookies barter back and forth about nearly every matter under the sun. Trade agreements, royal annulments, dangerous rumors of insidious cults rising at the border – every little tidbit is traded across magnificent tables, all while Pure Vanilla sits silently at the head.

It's interesting, more so than Shadow Milk had given it credit for. His boundless knowledge, unparalleled by any other Cookie, is still limited in all that has passed since his imprisonment. Pure Vanilla had filled in some gaps during the course of their games, but there was still much Shadow Milk is wholly unfamiliar with. Even if the other Cookies are rather dull, the information Shadow Milk soaks up like a sponge is not.

Which is not to say there aren't Cookies that are a little *too* dull.

Pure Vanilla had, with no small amount of amusement, privately dubbed Shadow Milk a 'timer' of sorts – one that Shadow Milk is all too delighted to keep the dignitaries on edge with. While the agony of his imprisonment had certainly sanded down Shadow Milk's patience, he is not unreasonable. There is a level of patience, a modicum of allowance he gives when perched in the darkness upon Pure Vanilla's shoulder, watching mild arguments slowly twist into open bickering.

Shadow Milk doesn't mind that part. Enjoys it, really. Seeing pristine, reserved delegates descend into scowls and sneers is the best part of the game.

But there is, still, a timer.

It's a bit fickle, wholly dependent on Shadow Milk's mood and the subject matter being discussed. Sometimes he'll let certain, extra-charming Cookies stretch on just a tad bit longer, sometimes Pure Vanilla's own meticulous input will stay Shadow Milk's hand for another hour or so. But, eventually, his meter of tolerance will hit zero.

After that, there's a number of things that can happen.

Sometimes Shadow Milk will shudder the room with a powerful quake; sometimes he chokes the room in instant darkness before letting light slowly fade back into place. He's toyed with gravity, ominous cackles, even the shadow of a giant beast falling across the windows before abruptly disappearing. All effective, all immediate in their reaction – and always followed up by the same, placid response from Pure Vanilla.

"My apologies." A gentle smile, a hand pressed to his chest. "It seems my guest is growing a bit restless. Please, continue."

Despite Pure Vanilla's calm assurances, the meetings are always swiftly concluded after that. Bitter arguments dissolve into hasty promises; demeaning sneers morph into uneasy smiles. It delights Shadow Milk to no end how quickly politicians will put aside their differences with a simple flash of his fangs. The uncertainty that laces their nervous glances makes it all the sweeter; they know he is watching, but never the where, never the how.

Exactly how Shadow Milk likes it.

"You know," Pure Vanilla remarks one night, knitting away in his chair, "you'd make a good politician."

"I was a good politician." Shadow Milk's lounging in mid-air, hands behind his head as he gazes out the bedroom window. "Wasn't worth it, believe me."

"Really?" Pure Vanilla plucks on a loose strand. "You seem to enjoy sitting in on my meetings."

"You seem to enjoy having me there."

Pure Vanilla glances up, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "You do keep things brisk."

"See?" Shadow Milk flips over in the air, propping his cheeks up with his hands. "And aren't you ever so grateful? Hasn't been a five hour snoozefest with me around."

"That's true," Pure Vanilla hums. "Though, you're certainly giving the delegates several new gray hairs. And I don't think you let that dairy farm dispute go on long enough."

Shadow Milk flicks his hand dismissively. "If a tiny little earthquake is enough to get them to stop squabbling in five minutes flat, it was never that important to begin with."

Pure Vanilla perks a disbelieving brow, eyes still on his stitchwork. "You were bored."

Shadow Milk grins back. "I was bored."

“You don’t need to stay if it irks you.” Pure Vanilla threads a new line through his needle. “While I do appreciate the company, I have withstood far worse meetings for far longer.”

“You’re too lenient.” Shadow Milk floats down to eye level, leaning in to inspect Pure Vanilla’s handiwork. It’s a simple garter stitch, a flowing pattern of golds and whites that blends pleasantly together. “They’ll keep you there for hours if you let them – and you will.”

“Perhaps.” Pure Vanilla sets the knitting down in his lap, eyes lidded but visibly amused. “Would that be so terrible?”

“Obviously.” Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest. “You’re already so terribly dull as it is. If I leave you to simply rot away in that chair, you’ll turn into little more than a blank-eyed drone like the rest of them. Honestly, I’m doing you a favor.”

“Dull, hm?” Pure Vanilla’s lips twitch with a smile. “Sounds like I’m disappointing you.”

Shadow Milk tuts disapprovingly. “Of course you are. You’ve got the most interesting Cookie in the world standing before you, and yet you’ve spent the last thirty minutes knitting.”

“I like knitting,” Pure Vanilla replies mildly.

“Dull,” Shadow Milk repeats, heaving a dramatic sigh. “Honestly. Why do I even bother?”

Pure Vanilla gives him a considering look, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “I wonder,” he hums, “if there was ever a moment where I couldn’t stop what I was doing to pay attention to your every whim – would my kingdom burn?”

“In an instant,” Shadow Milk replies, fluttering his lashes. “Care to test it?”

Pure Vanilla simply chuckles. “Perish the thought.” A nod of his head towards the door. “Shall we head downstairs, then?”

It’s become a bit of an unspoken ritual between them; after the sun has set and the staff has retired, Pure Vanilla will sneak them down to the kitchens for an evening meal. It’s usually simple things, nothing that requires too much preparation on their behalf. Some leftover croissants from the morning brunch, a few bowlfuls of Jelly Stew warmed on the stove all make suitable enough dishes, even if they are nothing spectacular. Anything that requires too much effort is out – and for good reason.

Pure Vanilla is a remarkably poor cook, as Shadow Milk has had the displeasure of finding out.

“Salt and sugar look exactly the same,” Pure Vanilla had once mumbled through a mouthful of pizza. “It’s not my fault.”

“You burned a bowl of frozen fruit,” Shadow Milk had retorted right back. “Your eyesight has nothing to do with it.”

Even if the meals are fairly meager, they're filling nonetheless; more importantly, the quiet of the kitchens opens up a path to new conversations that spill long into the night. Although Pure Vanilla's evening strolls rarely stray far from the gardens and sheep pastures, the banality of his choice in locations matters less and less to Shadow Milk the longer their talks go on. The meetings have opened up a whole new avenue of questioning for him, tantalizing scraps of current events that Shadow Milk eagerly pokes and prods Pure Vanilla on for more details.

Other Cookies may be tedious at best, but their ever-evolving drama is not.

Aside from soaking in the latest gossip, their discussions will often meander far beyond the simple rumors Pure Vanilla is all too quick to dismiss. Longer talks are held under the stars, strolling through the pastures or down the royal garden's many winding pathways. Topics flit by as capriciously as Shadow Milk's moods; some nights are spent dissecting the current political climate between neighboring kingdoms, and some become more of a scholarly exchange on local legends and myths. Shadow Milk's vast repertoire of knowledge had made most of his previous back-and-forths with other Cookies devolve into little more than a lecture – yet Pure Vanilla's grasp of the new, the now-unknown keeps Shadow Milk delightedly on his toes.

His favorite avenue of discussion, however, lies squarely in philosophy.

“Lies are the foundation of survival in nature.”

There's never any preamble needed; Shadow Milk can simply select any topic, present his view, and Pure Vanilla will respond in kind. Tonight finds them lounging in the greenhouse gazebo; Shadow Milk perching atop a fencepost with his legs daintily crossed, and Pure Vanilla bent low as he tends to the flowers. The moonlight shining through the glass panes above creates a dazzling, gentle glow that illuminates the room in full – it'd be an altogether pleasant place if the air didn't reek so detestably of lilies.

“Interesting,” Pure Vanilla hums back, tipping his water can over the nearest flowerbed. “Examples?”

“Take your precious plants.” Shadow Milk waves a lazy hand over the garden. “Orchids, for example, are notorious for being deceptive pollinators. They have evolved specifically to disguise themselves to lure insects through mimicry and deceit.”

“Pollination is often beneficial to both parties.” Pure Vanilla straightens up, glancing over. “Many flowers spread far and wide through the open trade of nectar. Some plants prospering through trickery does not negate the success of others through honesty.”

“And yet,” Shadow Milk points out, tilting his head with a grin, “it is the liars that spread the farthest! Of course, nature's lovely deceit extends far beyond your silly weeds. Tell me - how long will a fox survive the winter if he does not turn his coat to white and hide amongst the snowfall? How many species of butterflies would have been gobbled up off the face of Earthbread had they not their dashing, distracting eyespots to flash at would-be predators? To be small, weak, and honest is to be *erased*.”

Pure Vanilla sets his watering can down on the nearby ledge before turning back to Shadow Milk in full, hands folding primly in front of him. "There is merit in that argument," he concedes, a small smile on his lips. "But just as there is deceit, there is truth engrained in survival as well."

Shadow Milk perks a brow. "Examples?"

"My birds," Pure Vanilla replies easily. "A flock works together through song and call, informing their brethren of the same dangers you speak of. Honest communication keeps their kin alive, allowing them to remain safer and stronger in larger numbers together."

"Convenience," Shadow Milk dismisses, "if they were alone, they would lie and steal to scrape out their puny little existence like all the others."

"But they aren't alone," Pure Vanilla counters just as easily. "And that is because they trust one another. Trust cannot be gained through deceit."

Shadow Milk scoffs. "Of course it can."

"Not forever." Pure Vanilla's smile deepens. "An honest answer is far more compelling than a sweet lie, my friend."

"Ah!" Shadow Milk pushes himself off the fence post, gliding up through the air. "How naïve! Such a disappointing answer, and from a shepherd of all things!"

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, expression amused even as Shadow Milk grins confidentially down at him. "You've taken offense with my sheep now?"

"I always have. I told you, they smell like dung." Shadow Milk places one hand on his hip, pointing his cane at Pure Vanilla with the other. "But! I am speaking, naturally, of that mangy little mutt you keep in the pasture."

"Pavlova?" Pure Vanilla replies, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "I would hardly call a purebred Cream Wolf a mangy mutt."

"But that's what she is!" Shadow Milk grins ear to ear. "Well, I suppose mangy is a bit subjective. But I am speaking, my dear Nilly, of her birthright as a wolf. And, pray tell, what do you have her doing?"

"Guarding the livestock." Pure Vanilla sweeps his gaze over Shadow Milk, openly considering. "As she has been trained to do."

"Pheh! And isn't domestication the prettiest lie ever told." Shadow Milk crosses his legs in mid-air, propping up his chin with both hands. "She's a wolf! Meant to hunt and devour, to run free through open fields! And instead *you* have her penned, doting on the very beasts she's meant to prey upon."

"Pavlova is extremely clever," Pure Vanilla replies easily. "I have seen her open the gate with her nose myself. Should she wish to leave, nothing bars her way."

Shadow Milk leans in closer, grin widening. “Exactly! And why doesn’t she, you ask?”

“I didn’t-”

“Because,” Shadow Milk pronounces, sweeping his cane up in a grand twirl. “*She* is lying to herself! In exchange for her servitude, she betrays all that she is! Why scrap out your true existence in the woods when you can lay on your back in the fields and have every meal hand-delivered by a Cookie instead?” A confident cock of his head, eyes raking over Pure Vanilla’s considering expression. “Hm? Tell me I’m wrong.”

Annoyingly, Pure Vanilla’s considering look morphs into a small smile. “You’re only looking at one piece of the picture.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “Heh?”

“You,” Pure Vanilla replies, eyes glittering in amusement, “only see her for what she was born to be. But why must that be all she is limited to?”

“Limited to? She limits herself!” Shadow Milk flicks his cane; above his head, the shadowy figure of a snarling wolf appears before swiftly dissipating. “She has every opportunity, every right to devour those simple-minded sheep you keep. It is in her very nature! Yet you have deceived her into thinking that guarding, not devouring your flock is her natural state. And they believe your sweet little lie too! Don’t think I haven’t seen those rancid beasts cozing up to your mutt. They really think she’s one of them!”

“She is.”

Shadow Milk’s lips twitch into a scowl. “Lies,” he snaps. “And you don’t even have the good grace to admit them.”

“Pavlova is not a sheep.” Pure Vanilla leans over, plucking his staff from against the gazebo wall. “However, she is a part of the flock. She has earned their trust, and mine in turn. The choice to protect them is her own.”

“Because you feed her.” Shadow Milk twists in the air as Pure Vanilla carefully lowers himself down the gazebo steps; it’s simple enough to float alongside him, arms folding across Shadow Milk’s chest. “If you didn’t, she wouldn’t stay.”

“Perhaps not,” Pure Vanilla muses, staff tapping audibly along the dirt path as he walks. “But, I hardly think the kibble I bring would compare to the taste of a fresh sheep. If Pavlova chose to turn on me while I was back in the castle, little could stop her.”

“So you admit it?” Shadow Milk floats closer, leaning in. “You concede that it’s all based in a lie? If all you have to protect your flock from her true nature is hope, I’m sad to say that’s nothing more than a cheap trick of the mind.”

Pure Vanilla spares him another amused glance. “You are still not seeing the full picture. You equate my sheep to meat and nothing else.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “And what, pray tell, could they possibly be otherwise?”

“Companions.”

Shadow Milk abruptly stops in mid-air; Pure Vanilla keeps walking, unflinching in his course.

“Companions?” Shadow Milk repeats incredulously. “You must be joking.”

“Not at all.” Pure Vanilla glances backwards, making a beckoning motion with his head; unconsciously, Shadow Milk moves to follow. “As you said, you’ve seen the sheep resting beside her. In exchange for her protection, they remain alongside her through thick and thin. They keep her warm through cold nights, and play with her on sunny days. Even if I am not down in the pastures, Pavlova is never alone.”

“Ridiculous,” Shadow Milk snaps; he pivots in the air, circling around to hover directly in Pure Vanilla’s path. The other’s footsteps slow to a halt, yet the look he gives Shadow Milk is only one of idle curiosity. “You really think *companionship* is what makes a beast betray its nature? It’s convenience, nothing more.”

“I don’t think she betrays her nature at all.” Pure Vanilla’s meeting Shadow Milk’s disgruntled gaze with a calm smile. “I do not think we are defined by our creators’ intentions. What we chose to be is what we are. There is no greater truth than the acceptance of self.”

“Pheh.” Shadow Milk sharply averts his gaze, sneer deepening. “What a thing to hear from my *replacement*. I wonder what your precious Witches would say. Rejecting your *divine purpose*, are we? I can tell you how that goes.”

Pure Vanilla’s head tilts, gaze softening. “I do not exist to replace you, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“My, my, my,” Shadow Milk hums through gritted teeth. “What pretty lies you tell yourself! Maybe you’ll take on my stewardship of Deceit as well. I’m almost *proud*.”

A sudden touch sends a sharp spike of unease through Shadow Milk’s jam; Pure Vanilla is reaching up, gently taking Shadow Milk’s hand into his own. “If I was baked to replace you,” Pure Vanilla says softly, “then the Witches failed in my creation as well.”

Shadow Milk slowly drags his gaze back to the other; he schools his expression into sharp disdain, forbidding the strange twist in his chest from being known. “And why,” he breathes coldly, “is that?”

Pure Vanilla’s hand gives a gentle squeeze. “Because,” he replies simply, “I will betray that nature for your companionship every time.”

Shadow Milk’s own grip tightens; he can feel his eyes flash, feel something electric and dangerous building inside him. The emotion feels wholly unfamiliar, burning hot in his jam; yet not unpleasant. Not completely.

He refuses to lose, however – not to his own twisting emotions, not to the way he’s once again being lowered through the air down to Pure Vanilla’s level. The tender touch at his

cheek is the breaking point; Shadow Milk's eyes snap open to full as his cane drops from his palm.

His free hand instantly latches on to Pure Vanilla's waist; he pulls the other into the air alongside him.

"Oh, *Pure Vanilla Cookie!*" he laughs; his grin is sharp and wicked, eyes gleaming with delight as he twirls the other through the air. Pure Vanilla let out a short gasp of surprise, scrabbling wildly before his arms instinctively lock around Shadow Milk's neck; the other's grin just deepens as he swoops them upwards, floating high above the ground. "Who knew!" Shadow Milk crows happily. "Turns out you really are *such* a charmer when you want to be!"

"Shadow-" Pure Vanilla gasps, arms tightening as his gaze drops nervously to the ground. "Oh, goodness- that's very high-"

"Say it again," Shadow Milk purrs; he leans forward, reveling in the squeak as Pure Vanilla is lowered into a graceful dip. "Tell me again how you'd *betray* the Witches for me."

"That's-" Pure Vanilla's face is flushed, expression flickering somewhere between surprise and exhilaration. "That wasn't my point, exactly-"

"No, no! Don't ruin it now." Shadow Milk flips them around, sailing through the air in lazy spirals. "Who knew a silly old fool like you could be so good at sweet talk? I'm swooning here, I am!"

Pure Vanilla huffs a breathless laugh; even with his eyes wide and more than a little nervous, there's a genuine smile on his lips now. "You're being ridiculous."

"I am besotted," Shadow Milk croons. "Absolutely smitten."

"And I'm nauseous." Pure Vanilla gives him a gentle *pap* on his cheek. "Put me down or I'll lose my dinner."

Shadow Milk heaves a sigh, long and dramatic. "You've ruined it. Every time I start to like you, too." Still, he obliges, slowly lowering them through the air before setting Pure Vanilla's feet firmly back on the ground. "Better," he hums, leaning in close. "Are we satisfied, Your Majesty?"

Pure Vanilla blows out a breath, pushing the loose hair from his face. "Hardly," he huffs, but the smile on his face persists. "Goodness. In a mood tonight, are we?"

"Blame yourself," Shadow Milk replies easily; his hands have not left Pure Vanilla's hips, and the other's arms remain loosely encircled around his neck. "Whispering sweet nothings in my ear. You know what heresy does to me, Nilly."

Pure Vanilla laughs, cheeks flushing as he shakes his head. "I *meant* that I enjoy your companionship. The sacrilege wasn't the point."

"Oh, but it was the best *part*." Shadow Milk presses their foreheads together, eyes glittering with mischief as Pure Vanilla's own crinkle with mirth. "You should do it more often."

A fond smile as Pure Vanilla shakes his head, the motion gently nuzzling his forehead against Shadow Milk's own. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm in a good mood," Shadow Milk hums back, eyes fluttering half-shut. "Capitalize on it."

Pure Vanilla's own eyes lid, his smile unfaltering. "Meaning?"

Shadow Milk gives the other's hips a squeeze, pulling Pure Vanilla closer; less than an inch apart, their Soul Jams pulse dangerously, the pull between them taught and tight as Pure Vanilla visibly represses a shudder.

"I mean," Shadow Milk all but purrs, grin sharpening to a wicked point:

"Your place, or mine?"

--

In all fairness, Shadow Milk hadn't been thinking about it.

Between his new schedule, his nightly strolls, and his insatiable appetite for all the new knowledge swimming about in his head, there hadn't been much room for anything else. Shadow Milk is, above all else, a trickster – the schemes he lays and the sweet little lies he scatters about the world are rarely things he gives a second thought to unless warranted. There's far too much to do and see to reflect on past mischief-making for more than a fond remembrance or two.

Which is why it is all the more jarring to be jolted awake in bed by the thunderous sound of a horn.

The realization is not immediate; Shadow Milk bolts instinctively upright in bed before his mind processes the motion. The echo reverberates through the room, vibrations singing in his jam as Shadow Milk blinks rapidly and tries to refocus on his surroundings. His thoughts muddle and mix, trying to shake off the remaining traces of sleep as he ticks through the situation.

The where – Pure Vanilla's bedroom. Normal, nothing out of the ordinary. The who – he's alone, or at the very least, there's no intruders. Pure Vanilla is *somehow* still asleep next to him, sprawled out haphazardly with mussed-up hair and flecks of drool at the corner of his mouth. Also nothing out of the ordinary. Their connection last night had been good – *really* good, an exhilarating blur of colors and heat that brings a flush to his cheeks to recall – but beyond stretching for far longer and reaching much more dizzying heights than usual, nothing had seemed amiss about it either.

Shadow Milk shakes his head, brushing away the memories as he sharpens his gaze on his surroundings. Right. The noise. A blaring horn. An open window, curtains fluttering on the morning breeze. The source.

Shoving the covers aside, Shadow Milk slips out of the bed and rubs at his face; his brief float across the room is interrupted by yet another roar of a horn that makes him clap his hands to his ears and wince openly.

Yep. Definitely coming from the window.

Once the sound has died down yet again, Shadow Milk irritably shoves his head out the window, squinting in the sunlight. There's nothing amongst the towers, nothing hovering in the air around him; Shadow Milk's gaze slowly falls downwards, down to the ground below where-

Ah.

Shadow Milk's gaze widens as he takes in the scene below. Standing at the castle gates is an army, a sea of black and white with rows upon rows of soldiers packed in tight formation. The emblem of the Dark Cacao Kingdom flutters along lines of banners raised high; at the head of the pack stands the looming figure of Dark Cacao Cookie himself, flanked on either side by his generals. The Vanillian guards at the gates have their halberds crossed, blocking entry – but even from here Shadow Milk can taste their unease, the tremble in their arms.

As Shadow Milk stares blankly downwards, one of the generals seems to spot him – there's a shout, a point upwards as Dark Cacao Cookie's gaze follows the motion. Shadow Milk fights down a reflexive recoil as Dark Cacao's head turns towards him, greatsword lifting into the air with Soul Jam a gleam in the morning light.

“BEAST OF DECEIT!” Dark Cacao Cookie bellows, his sword pointed directly up at the towers. “YOU HAVE NO CLAIM TO THIS PLACE! COME AND FACE ME IN BATTLE, OR I WILL STRIKE YOU DOWN MYSELF!”

Shadow Milk cranes his head, following the direction of Dark Cacao Cookie's sword – and sees the tip pointing straight at the self-portrait banners Shadow Milk had sprinkled along the towers oh so long ago.

Right. He'd been asked to remove those, hadn't he.

A long, aggravated sigh as Shadow Milk pulls back from the window, rubbing vigorously at his face. It's too early for – this. All of this. As delightful as the scene is, it is also very, very annoying - another blare of the war horn does little to dissuade this assessment.

Shadow Milk floats over to the bed; Pure Vanilla is still fully unconscious, slumbering away even with the reverberations rocking the room.

Unsurprising. It's hardly any quieter than his snores.

“BEAST OF DECEIT!” is roared once more through the open window. “RELEASE PURE VANILLA COOKIE FROM YOUR GRASP! RETURN MY COMRADE TO ME, AND YOU MAY YET BE SHOWN MERCY!”

Shadow Milk pinches his temples, mouthing words unspoken in millennia – for good cause, certainly, but warranted at this time. With a roll of his eyes, Shadow Milk summons his cane into his palm and points it squarely at Pure Vanilla. The other’s body lifts up into the air, sheets slipping off him as Shadow Milk floats him carefully across the room. Another point of his cane and Pure Vanilla’s gliding limply out into the open air; the collective gasps from below signal that, yes, he has been spotted.

Another flick of his cane and Pure Vanilla begins to descend; Shadow Milk floats over to the window, peering out to guide the other’s slumbering form down and down as he angles Pure Vanilla’s descent with his cane. The shocked cries from below, perhaps at closer proximity, do seem to finally rouse Pure Vanilla – at least, there’s a sudden twist, a sharp flailing of his body as Pure Vanilla thrashes helplessly in the air with a startled cry.

Oh good. He’s awake.

Shadow Milk taps his cane once; Pure Vanilla drops from the air, falling three feet to land squarely in Dark Cacao Cookie’s outstretched arms.

There’s a loud murmuring from the crowd; Shadow Milk can’t make out the words exchanged, but Pure Vanilla’s face is completely flushed, his hands tugging down on his night robe as he wriggles in Dark Cacao Cookie’s arms. The larger Cookie immediately sets him down, his own expression openly confused as Pure Vanilla immediately turns on his heels and sends a scalding, furious glare straight up at Shadow Milk’s smiling face.

“SHADOW MILK COOKIE!” is howled through bright-red cheeks.

“Deal with this,” Shadow Milk calls back, before reaching up and shutting the windows with an audible *click*.

Chapter 14

The ticking of the clock fills the room with a steady, thudding beat.

Shadow Milk toys with the edge of his sleeves; he's perched on the bed, legs dangling casually over the side as he kicks them back and forth. He flicks his gaze between the sheets, his lap, the ticking clock itself that is the only sound breaking the cold silence enveloping the room. His grip on his cane tightens, then relaxes as he continues to peer idly over every inch of the room – everywhere save for the figure stood directly in front of him, staring him down.

Pure Vanilla Cookie's icy displeasure is palpable.

In all fairness, Shadow Milk had enjoyed quite a bit of reprieve since foisting the other off into Dark Cacao Cookie's open arms. After shutting the window to drown out Pure Vanilla's shouts, Shadow Milk had simply snuggled back into bed to resume his slumber without further disturbance. The only interruption had come in the form of the door swinging open to reveal three very frazzled Neapolitan sisters; they had rushed about, thrown open dressers and gathered up an assortment of robes while Shadow Milk had blearily blinked at them from the bed.

They'd said nothing to him as they'd swept from the room – though the pink one, Fresa, had shot Shadow Milk a particularly nasty look before slamming the door behind her.

Shadow Milk had just rolled his eyes and gone back to sleep.

Several hours must have passed since; by the time Shadow Milk had once again opened his eyes, the sun had risen high in the sky and the morning glow within the room had shifted to the vibrant heat of mid-afternoon. He'd yawned, stretched his arms above his head and shifted out of bed – only to have the door slam open once again, startling him mid-yawn.

The sight of a now fully-clothed Pure Vanilla Cookie's flushed, furious expression would have been very, very funny to Shadow Milk, had it not been directed squarely at him.

There's not been a word spoken since; Pure Vanilla Cookie remains standing there, still as a statue with his stare boring down into Shadow Milk like two pointed daggers. Shadow Milk, teetering somewhere between cautiously curious and gleefully apprehensive, has not met Pure Vanilla's gaze once. He continues fiddling with the tip of his cane, pretending he does not see the furious presence looming over him.

The silence, however, is stretching on a little too long for his liking.

Shadow Milk, reluctantly, is the first to break it. "So-"

"No." Pure Vanilla's reply is immediate, clipped and curt.

Shadow Milk finally meets Pure Vanilla's cold stare with a surprised blink of his own. "I-"

“No.”

A huff follows as Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “Excuse-”

Pure Vanilla holds up a hand, a direct gesture for silence. “No.” His own eyes narrow, the frown on his face unyielding. “I need to find my words.”

Shadow Milk’s lips twist in a sneer; yet, even as he folds his arms across his chest, he does not speak. There’s a spark of curiosity keeping him still – he hasn’t seen Pure Vanilla as commanding as this in quite some time. It’s... intriguing. A little bit exciting, like a tingly feeling in his jam, even if Shadow Milk can’t quite place why.

Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches higher, pinching at his brow as his eyes clench shut. There’s a grimace, a gentle rubbing at his forehead as he stands there and heaves a sigh that shudders through his form. Finally, after a long moment, his eyes reopen as he fixes Shadow Milk with an incredibly tired gaze.

“Why.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow, crossing his legs as he leans back on the bed. “You needed to gather your thoughts for that?”

“Why,” Pure Vanilla repeats wearily. “Of all Cookies.”

A shrug as Shadow Milk allows himself the smallest of smiles. “Is it *my* fault he can’t take a joke?”

“Dark Cacao Cookie.” Pure Vanilla closes his eyes again, brow pinching. “You thought Dark Cacao Cookie would take your words as a joke? Dark Cacao Cookie.”

“You keep saying his name,” Shadow Milk replies mildly.

Pure Vanilla straightens up, eyes snapping open as he looks Shadow Milk up and down. “How many? How many other letters did you send?”

“Just the one,” Shadow Milk replies innocently. “Really, I’m hardly to blame in the first place. You were the one late to our meeting, mucking about with your sheep.”

“So you went through my things.”

“Come on. I merely browsed!” Shadow Milk casually flicks his hair over his shoulder. “He’s *so* dull. Four lines is all he sent you, you know that? I thought I’d spice up the reply, that’s all.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes narrow. “You sent a declaration of war.”

Shadow Milk tilts his head, fluttering his lashes. “I added a winky face.”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla replies curtly, raising a brow. “I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“A little.”

“Because he’s not leaving.”

Shadow Milk’s smile instantly drops to a frown. “Excuse me?”

“He’s not leaving,” Pure Vanilla repeats. “And we have a meeting with him in an hour.”

“We?” Shadow Milk stares at Pure Vanilla incredulously. “Who is this we?”

“You, and myself.” Pure Vanilla motions to the door with his staff. “Come. The army has already set up their tents in the grounds. I’ll need to escort you through their camp, or you’re likely to find yourself on the wrong end of their swords.”

“Hold on, hold on!” Shadow Milk pushes himself off the bed, hands planting squarely on his hips. “Aren’t we getting a bit ahead of ourselves? Confidence is all well and good, but you’re stepping on my lines here!”

“You did this,” Pure Vanilla replies shortly. “You’ve no one to blame but yourself.”

“I,” Shadow Milk pronounces indignantly, hand coming up to his chest, “have not agreed to anything! I have no interest in wasting my time with that stuffy old codger.”

“He wants to assess you himself.” Pure Vanilla’s tone is absolute, unflinching. “He’s not leaving until he does.”

Shadow Milk sneers back. “So? What do I care?”

“Fine.” Pure Vanilla turns on his heels towards the door. “Then I shall spend my days attending to *his* needs instead of yours.”

A jolt of shock runs through Shadow Milk’s jam; he blinks rapidly as Pure Vanilla whisks himself from the room before hastily zipping after the other. “Whoa, now hold on a moment! What does *that* mean?!”

Pure Vanilla is already descending the tower’s stairs, staff tapping loudly on each step. “Dark Cacao Cookie is my precious comrade.” There’s a cold glance backwards at Shadow Milk hovering overhead. “Seeing as I am now playing host unexpectedly, I will be making sure he and his people are well accommodated for their stay.”

“Oh, please!” Shadow Milk twists around the corner, following Pure Vanilla every step of the way. “Those Cookies don’t need accommodations! They’re stiff as a board, their king included!”

“Perhaps,” Pure Vanilla replies neutrally. “But they are my guests nonetheless. And I will be devoting my time wholly to seeing to their continued comfort within the kingdom. You, on the other hand, are fully capable of taking care of yourself without me.” A smile flits across Pure Vanilla’s face; it does not meet his eyes. “It has been quite a while since I’ve enjoyed Dark Cacao Cookie’s company one-on-one. Perhaps a lengthy stay is for the better. I’ve missed him dearly.”

Shadow Milk bristles; something hot and foul singes in his chest as his eyes narrow in displeasure. “I know what you’re doing.”

“I am speaking only the truth.” Pure Vanilla hops off the last step, continuing his unbroken pace through the halls. “Dark Cacao Cookie and the armies that you have summoned will not leave until he is satisfied. Until you decide to grace us with your presence, I will be solely spending my time in his.”

Shadow Milk’s teeth grit as Pure Vanilla sharply turns a corner, disappearing from sight; he rolls his eyes before swiftly floating after. The servant Cookies in the hall part dutifully as Pure Vanilla strides past, dipping into polite bows while shooting nervous glances Shadow Milk’s way. Shadow Milk crosses his arms across his chest, fuming as he follows Pure Vanilla around each bend – the other isn’t sparing him so much as a glance, gaze set firmly ahead.

“Fine!” Shadow Milk finally snaps; he pivots in the air, abruptly blocking Pure Vanilla’s path. “If it means that much to you to get rid of him as *quickly* as possible, I’ll go.”

Pure Vanilla’s steps finally slow, coming to a halt as his cold stare finally meets Shadow Milk’s irritated glare. “I do not want him gone,” Pure Vanilla replies tonelessly. “I simply would like to set his mind at ease.”

Shadow Milk’s lips twist into an ugly smirk. “You think meeting me will make him feel *better*?”

“That wholly depends on you and your choice of actions.” Pure Vanilla’s brow perks. “If all else fails, I will simply have to devote myself to remaining at his side until he is satisfied.”

“Oh, shut up,” Shadow Milk scowls. “You’ve made your point.”

“Have I now?” Pure Vanilla hums. “And here I thought I was being subtle.”

Sarcasm. How rare.

Shadow Milk gives Pure Vanilla an appraising look up and down. “I’ve changed my mind,” he decides. “I don’t like you better cranky.”

“Forgive me,” Pure Vanilla replies dryly. “Being dropped in front of hundreds of strangers in my bedclothes was not a pleasant start to my day.”

“Aw.” Shadow Milk grins ear to ear, leaning in. “But I like you best in your bedclothes. Especially after *last* night.”

There’s a flicker of – something. A hint of thin amusement that Pure Vanilla seems to swiftly stifle with a long, drawn-out sigh. He glances to his right, towards a small wooden doorway tucked into the corner. Pure Vanilla’s hand suddenly comes up, snagging Shadow Milk by the cuff and giving a tug. “Come here.”

Shadow Milk blinks, allowing himself to be yanked along as Pure Vanilla pulls open the door and steps through. The interior of the room reveals it to be nothing more than a small broom

closet; there's barely enough space for one Cookie, let alone two. More curiously still, Pure Vanilla firmly locks the door behind them before turning around and fixing Shadow Milk with a look that is decidedly less irritable than before.

"I know you did not mean for this to happen." Pure Vanilla's tone is surprisingly gentled, even if the weariness behind it has not left. "This situation is hardly favorable for either of us, you most of all."

"Hardly," Shadow Milk repeats idly; his gaze roams over Pure Vanilla's face, assessing this new shift in tone. "Should I be surprised you didn't tell them, Hero of Truth?"

Pure Vanilla sighs again, his eyes lidding in fatigue. "I should have. That fault lies with me. I made a promise to not withhold things from them ever again, and I fear that promise has only worsened the matter."

"Shouldn't have made it." Shadow Milk leans in, tapping Pure Vanilla's forehead with a gentle flick. "Honestly, promising to *never* keep a secret? That was a lie the moment it left your lips."

"I know." Pure Vanilla's hand comes up to catch Shadow Milk's own, lowering it from his forehead with a gentle grasp. "I struggle with these matters, to find the right words when trying to make them understand. A letter never seems the right way to break the news."

"Well," Shadow Milk replies dryly, "*my* letter seems to have proven that correct."

Pure Vanilla huffs a laugh, short and weary. "Yes, thank you for that."

"Honestly," Shadow Milk continues, shrugging a shoulder, "what could you have said? Hello, my oh so dearest companions, do you remember those Beasts that nearly crumbled everyone and everything you love to pitiful, floury dust? Well, the impeccably handsome one is staying in my guest room. Love, Pure Vanilla Cookie."

A ghost of a smile traces Pure Vanilla's lips. "Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"Not at all." Shadow Milk cocks his head with a smirk. "Your silly little self was doomed from the moment you let me in. It's what you get for being a fool."

A gentle squeeze to his hand as Pure Vanilla shakes his head, eyes tired. "I suppose you're right. I couldn't even be certain if you were coming or going. By the time I sent the letters, you may have already changed your mind."

"Still might," Shadow Milk hums. "Are you going to tell him about the bond?"

"No."

The reply is immediate, drawing a curious perk to Shadow Milk's brow. "No?"

"No," Pure Vanilla repeats, voice firm. "It is far too dangerous."

Shadow Milk's smirk deepens. "Don't trust him?"

“I trust Dark Cacao Cookie with my life.” Another squeeze to Shadow Milk’s hand, still clasped by Pure Vanilla’s own. “But that does not mean I think it is his business, or wise to share such knowledge in the open air. The knowledge that a single wound will afflict the pair of us would be ruinous in the hands of Dark Enchantress Cookie, or any others who wish us harm.”

A vague recollection stirs in the back of Shadow Milk’s memories, the dull feeling of crumbs dripping from his arm as he’d lain in the dirt. The crisp scent of magic shimmering in the air, smoldering ruins all around from his first attempt at a true battle against his fated foe. The blinding fury that had consumed him, the feeling of invisible chains at his throat with the bond tying them tight – the pain as he’d doubled over, the same blast he’d sent through Pure Vanilla’s shoulder echoed perfectly in his own.

Not his finest moment, to be sure. And yet now here the same Cookie stands, gently holding Shadow Milk’s hand in his own.

A strange notion to dwell on. When had Shadow Milk first begun to allow Pure Vanilla’s touch without a second thought?

Shadow Milk cocks his head, eyes sweeping over Pure Vanilla appraisingly. “You know you’ll be lying to him again. Not being very truthful, are we?”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla meets his gaze with a small smile. “Which is why it is very important that this meeting goes well. If you do not manage to convince Dark Cacao Cookie that you do not pose a threat to me, I fear this situation will only worsen.”

Shadow Milk puffs out his chest. “I do pose a threat,” he retorts confidently. “I’m the-” What was it Black Raisin Cookie had said? “The most dangerously malevolent and powerful being in the entire kingdom.”

“You certainly are,” Pure Vanilla replies, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “But, perhaps I could trouble you to pretend otherwise? At the very least, that you mean no harm?”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk tilts his head, expression purposefully thoughtful. “Lying to the great Dark Cacao Cookie, on his dearest comrade Pure Vanilla Cookie’s behalf? They’ll write ballads of such treachery.”

Pure Vanilla’s smile is unflinching. “I’ve been told you’re quite an actor. Surely the great Shadow Milk Cookie could pull off such a feat?”

Shadow Milk’s eyes lid, a pleasant undercurrent of warmth flitting through his jam. “My, my. Flattery will get you everywhere, you know that?”

“I’d hoped so.” Pure Vanilla nods to the door. “Now, let’s be off. We shouldn’t keep Dark Cacao Cookie waiting.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk’s gaze drops as his hand is finally released, Pure Vanilla turning to fiddle with the door. “You know, you don’t sound like you’re angry with me anymore.”

“Oh, I am. Very much so.” The lock turns; Pure Vanilla pulls open the door, shooting an amused glance over his shoulder. “Which is why you’ll be sleeping in your own bed tonight.”

If Pure Vanilla hears Shadow Milk’s affronted gasp, he doesn’t show it; the other simply sweeps from the room, the taps of his staff echoing down the hall as Shadow Milk glares at the spot where he’d just been.

Forced to play nice with Dark Cacao Cookie, and not even warm sheets to look forward to after.

This day is thoroughly ruined.

--

The walk through the Dark Cacao Kingdom’s camp is illuminating, to say the least.

Despite the grounds being only a few feet away from the gardens, the glaring sparseness of the tents fluttering in the winds is distinct. At the head of the path stands two guards, and even with Pure Vanilla leading the way, the looks they give Shadow Milk are the most hostile he’s received since-

Well, technically Fresa this morning. But still.

The encampment had clearly been set up swiftly; the rest of the Cookies are still milling about, drilling stakes into the ground and barking orders to their fellow soldiers. The fluttering banners of the Dark Cacao kingdom fly proudly above the tents lined up in neat little rows on either side of the path. As Pure Vanilla strides forward, Shadow Milk floating at his heels, the looks being sent their way are openly suspicious and all-too tense. Even the wolves resting at their masters’ feet give a warning growl as Shadow Milk passes by.

Such a welcoming bunch.

There’s no guessing game as to which tent houses Dark Cacao Cookie; the largest stands proud and tall at the end of the path, encircled by two pairs of guards that stiffen immediately at their approach. The front pair even have the gall to cross their spears, barring the way as Pure Vanilla’s steps slow to a halt; there’s a beat of silence, a lone gust of wind that draws an unbidden shiver up Shadow Milk’s spine as the three of them stare each other down.

“Let them pass.”

The deep, commanding voice from within is unmistakable; the moment the order is issued the guards step back, spears immediately drawn to the side. They nod at Pure Vanilla in unison; he simply bows his head in acknowledgement before sweeping inside.

After a pointed look at the pair, Shadow Milk rolls his eyes and follows the other inside.

It's almost comical how Dark Cacao Cookie's presence dwarfs the rest of the space; even with the spacious size of the tent, it feels as if there is barely any room in it at all. Dark Cacao Cookie is seated at the head of a small meeting table with two twin chairs on either side of him – yet, Shadow Milk cannot help but notice both are noticeably smaller than Dark Cacao's own. His right hand rests on his greatsword as he silently looks over the pair before him; his cold expression reveals nothing, yet Shadow Milk is violently aware he is being picked apart with each sweeping glance.

Dark Cacao Cookie's gaze slides to Pure Vanilla; after a moment, his eyes visibly soften. "Pure Vanilla Cookie."

"Dark Cacao Cookie," Pure Vanilla replies with a smile. "How are you settling in? You must be quite fatigued from such a long journey."

"I am well, thank you. I am glad to see you still hale and hearty." Dark Cacao Cookie motions to the chair on his right. "Please, be seated."

As Pure Vanilla moves to pull out his chair, Shadow Milk has to suppress a grimace as Dark Cacao's attention snaps back to him with a look that is far, far less friendly. Dark Cacao Cookie's sharp eyes roam freely, assessing in open dislike before he motions to the other chair. "Beast of Deceit."

"Dark Cacao Cookie." Pure Vanilla's tone is mild, yet somehow – scolding? He's already seated, hands folded in his lap as his staff rests against the chair. He's tilting his head towards Dark Cacao Cookie, something strange and unspoken passing between them as Dark Cacao Cookie's brow pinches slightly.

"Very well," he says after a moment, tone begrudging. "Shadow Milk Cookie. Take a seat."

"Please," Pure Vanilla adds lightly; Dark Cacao says nothing, only grunts in reply.

Shadow Milk perks a brow but says nothing; after a moment, he drifts over to the chair, pulling it out from under him. He crosses his legs, hands coming to rest on his knees as he floats several inches off the seat.

The sight is apparently very displeasing to Dark Cacao Cookie, based on the deeper furrow to his brow – but he says nothing, only slides his gaze back to Pure Vanilla. "Shall we begin, or have you anything to say?"

"We have already spoken at length." Pure Vanilla's smile is calm, his words slow and steady. "My mind is unchanged, if that is what you are asking after."

"Hm." Dark Cacao snaps his attention back to Shadow Milk, hand tightening on the grip of his sword. "Then, I will speak to you. There are three questions I require answers to." Dark Cacao's eyes narrow. "You will answer them to my satisfaction."

Shadow Milk suppresses the urge to sneer, even as a tinge of amusement flickers in his chest. So commanding, so *imposing*. So very certain of his unyielding, unwavering resolve.

He wouldn't last five minutes in the Spire of Deceit.

"First," Dark Cacao continues, eyes never once straying from Shadow Milk's own, "you will tell me why you are here."

Shadow Milk's lips twitch, fighting down the urge to smile. Seriously? "You asked me to be here, Bitterbrows. And this pest," he nods his head towards Pure Vanilla, "was being a pain about it."

Dark Cacao visibly bristles, grip readjusting on his sword. "You will not speak of Pure Vanilla Cookie with such disrespect in my presence!"

"Dark Cacao Cookie," Pure Vanilla interrupts quietly.

It is apparently all he needs to say; Dark Cacao Cookie's angry glare does not lessen, but his hold on the sword slackens once more. "I see," he says after a moment, voice tight with displeasure. "I was told I would need to make allowances for your... mannerisms."

Shadow Milk shrugs, hands coming up to rest behind his head. "Next question?"

"No." Dark Cacao Cookie is still pinning him with his gaze. "I will rephrase the first. Why are you, Bea- Shadow Milk Cookie, residing within the Vanilla Kingdom?"

Ah. A hardball, right off the bat.

Shadow Milk tilts his head towards Pure Vanilla again. "He didn't tell you?"

"I've heard his answer," Dark Cacao replies coldly. "I will now hear yours."

Shadow Milk clicks his tongue, considering his options. Several snappish, witty rejoinders are the first thing that spring to his tongue – but they're of no help here. Pure Vanilla had asked him to put on a show, to set the big lug at ease; which thoroughly limits the gleeful replies he so desperately yearns to unleash.

"I was invited." Shadow Milk feigns a yawn, using it as an excuse to avert his eyes. "It's a matter of convenience."

"Convenience," Dark Cacao repeats slowly. "Explain your words."

Shadow Milk tamps down on the urge to smirk. "I have a vested interest in the other half of the Soul Jam." A droplet of truth. "Seeing as I cannot take it outright, I'm merely protecting what's mine." Finished off with a sweet lie.

"Protecting? You claim to be... protecting him?" Dark Cacao Cookie's expression is one of open bafflement; even Pure Vanilla looks mildly surprised, until Shadow Milk shoots him a warning look.

"Not how I'd put it," Shadow Milk replies, turning his attention back to Dark Cacao with a lazy wave of his hand. "The Soul Jam is what's important. He happens to be attached to it."

Dark Cacao's face swiftly darkens. "So that is your plan, then. You intend to take the Soul Jam, just as your brethren before you."

Shadow Milk cocks his head. "Is that your second question?"

"Yes," Dark Cacao snaps. "Now answer."

"*Bzzzt!* Wrong!" Shadow Milk sing-songs, twirling his cane in the palm of his hand. "Sorry big guy, but thanks for playing. Better luck next time!"

"Shadow Milk Cookie."

Great. Now Pure Vanilla's disappointed voice is aimed at him instead.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "*No*, I am not here to take the Soul Jam. Been there, done that. *Bor-ing!* He's ruined it, anyway. Filled it up with so much disgusting Truth – honestly, it makes me want to hurl every time I look at it."

Dark Cacao's eyes narrow once more. "Why should I believe your words?"

"Hello?" Shadow Milk motions to himself. "Beast of Deceit here. I do give you truths, you know – just ugly ones. It's kind of the point! Also, why are you even bothering to ask me questions if you're going to doubt every word I say?"

Dark Cacao's lips draw up into a grimace; he glances impatiently at Pure Vanilla, motioning with his head in a silent gesture.

Pure Vanilla stares calmly back; after a moment, he slowly shakes his head. Dark Cacao lets out an aggravated huff before returning his gaze forward.

How amusing.

"I am well acquainted with your kind, Shadow Milk Cookie." Dark Cacao Cookie leans back in his chair, mouth twisted in displeasure. "You seek destruction and ruin. There is no love for Cookiekind in your hearts."

"Yes, yes," Shadow Milk replies impatiently. "Can you hurry up with the third question? I have things to do, you know."

Dark Cacao's eyes narrow. "You rush your own demise."

"Oo. Scary."

"Enough." Dark Cacao Cookie gets to his feet, pushing himself up from the table as he towers above them both. "My time battling Mystic Flour Cookie taught me much of the Beasts' ways – how you warp what is good and pure to suit your own foul perceptions. I will not allow you to do the same here."

Shadow Milk lifts a hand, pretending to inspect it for dirt. "Not a question, Bitterbrows."

Dark Cacao's hand slams down on the table, splintering a nasty crack through the wood. "My *question* is thus. What assurance do I have that you have not poisoned my comrade's mind? What proof have you that you should be allowed to remain for even a second more within these lands?" Dark Cacao heaves his greatsword up; in an instant it is pointed across the table, its tip held directly under Shadow Milk's chin. "Tell me," he demands, "why I should not strike you down, here and now."

Shadow Milk's eyes lid dangerously; he can feel a gentle scrape, metal pricking ever so slightly at his throat. From the corner of his vision, he can see Pure Vanilla raising a hand to his own throat, expression tight and pained.

Something dark twists in Shadow Milk's chest.

There's a moment of silence, an overwhelming tension bleeding through as Shadow Milk sucks in a slow breath. His hand tightens on his cane; he rolls his wrist once, magic pulsing in his palm.

The gleaming metal of the sword abruptly bends, melting away like water in Dark Cacao Cookie's grasp. He gives a startled shout, stepping back in alarm – and only then does Shadow Milk allow his venomous darkness to flood the room, obscuring him from the other's sight.

"What is-" Dark Cacao gasps; Shadow Milk can hear him fumbling blindly, chair scraping against the rug. "Pure Vanilla Cookie, get behind me!"

Shadow Milk taps his cane to his foot; in an instant the scene shifts, a pattern of stars fanning out across the endless black before he points and pulls, yanking Dark Cacao forward. The other stumbles, head snapping upwards as he's tugged back into view – his sword is lifted back up in an instant, though little more than a hilt now. "BEAST!" he roars. "RELEASE ME FROM THIS – THIS TRICKERY!"

Another flick of Shadow Milk's cane and Dark Cacao is sent hurtling upwards; his back hits an invisible wall, arms instantly pinned to his sides. Shadow Milk stares coldly upwards as the other struggles in vain.

"I think," Shadow Milk drawls, "I should make something perfectly clear."

Dark Cacao Cookie's mouth opens in furious retort; Shadow Milk makes a zipping motion with his hands, forcibly silencing the noise.

"You," Shadow Milk continues pointedly, "fought Mystic Flour Cookie. Now, don't get me wrong, she's a dear friend of mine. Bit boring, kind of a party pooper with her apathy bit. But..." Shadow Milk floats upwards, hands folding behind his back as he meets Dark Cacao Cookie's murderous gaze. "As powerful as she is? You, my bitter companion, were playing on *easy* mode."

Dark Cacao thrashes in Shadow Milk's invisible grasp, straining against his binds – useless. Funny, but useless.

“You fought apathy. Apathy!” Shadow Milk’s lips twist in a grin as he floats past Dark Cacao’s head. “Do you really think you fought a Beast at their full power, when she can’t bring herself to care enough to unleash it? And I thought I was the clown!”

Shadow Milk flips upside-down, hands coming to rest on his knees as Dark Cacao’s struggling begins to slow; the other’s fury is no lessened, but his eyes are sharp and focused. He’s listening, at least. “So,” Shadow Milk continues, tilting his head mockingly, “let’s get things straight, shall we? You asked for assurance, so let me *assure* you of this – you, Bitterbrows, are not *capable* of striking me down. Waving your little toothpick around is meaningless.” A grin, sharp and pointed. “Whenever I so choose, I could raze this kingdom to the ground. It would be instant – no silly little army, no feeble modern magics have the power to stop me.”

Dark Cacao Cookie lies still; his look is murderous, even as Shadow Milk sighs.

“Oh, you’re so terribly dull. Don’t you get it?” He shoves his cane right under Dark Cacao’s chin. “I *could* do all those things. But, I haven’t.” Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder. “*That’s* your reassurance. If I’d wanted to do all those nasty little things you’re so afraid of, I already would have. Neither of you have the power to stop me.”

Shadow Milk’s grin grows as he floats back, spreading his arms wide. “So *relax*, my friend! Why worry about something you’re powerless to control? Honestly, you shouldn’t get so worked up – don’t you have enough wrinkles to worry about with that perma-frown of yours?”

Dark Cacao Cookie studies him silently – not that he has a choice. The hostility is unabated, but there’s something appraising in the iciness of his stare.

“Anyway,” Shadow Milk drawls, waving a hand dismissively. “I have no intention of letting anyone else take what’s mine. So go and stomp around the grounds all you like. I’m not going anywhere, and neither is he.” Shadow Milk then leans in, perking a brow. “Now. Shall we head on back?”

Dark Cacao’s brow furrows in confusion; Shadow Milk simply lifts his cane, tapping it against the other’s forehead.

The scene melts away like water rushing down the walls; reality shifts back in to claim their senses as Shadow Milk’s illusion slowly fades out around them. There is no small amount of amusement in watching Dark Cacao Cookie blink rapidly, chest heaving as he takes in his surroundings with wild eyes – only to find himself sitting exactly where Shadow Milk had left him. He rapidly grasps at himself, touching his face and chest before his gaze swiftly snaps to his sword. Shadow Milk has to stifle a laugh, watching Dark Cacao carefully examine the blade for any sign of mischief, as if he doesn’t believe it had only been a trick of the mind.

Pure Vanilla reaches out, gently placing a hand on Dark Cacao’s arm – and earning a violent start in reply. Dark Cacao shifts uncomfortably in his seat; he even goes so far as to slowly pull his arm away as he scans Pure Vanilla up and down – untrusting of his own eyes.

“Dark Cacao Cookie?” Pure Vanilla says softly. “Are you alright?”

“I...” Dark Cacao Cookie runs a hand over his face, glancing uneasily between Shadow Milk and Pure Vanilla. “What happened?”

A moment of hesitation; Pure Vanilla shoots Shadow Milk an equally appraising look before turning back to the other. “You lowered your sword and went very quiet. Are you alright?”

“He’s fine.” Shadow Milk pushes himself out of his seat, floating idly above the table as he twirls his cane in his palm. “Don’t worry, Dollface. Just had a little chat, Cookie to Cookie. I think we’re on the same page now.”

Pure Vanilla’s studying him closely, glancing between Dark Cacao’s unsettled expression and Shadow Milk’s glib grin.

“Well!” Shadow Milk claps his hands together. “That was three questions, so I think I’m done here, hm? I’ll let you two old farts catch up; mind if I wander around the camp in the meantime? Seems like a *real* fun place.”

“Shadow Milk,” Pure Vanilla says warningly.

A wink as Shadow Milk leans in, letting his face hover less than an inch from Pure Vanilla’s own. “Are you going to tell me to behave?”

Pure Vanilla lofts a brow. “Would there be a point?”

“No,” Shadow Milk grins back. “But I like it when you ask nicely.”

Then – just because he’s there, just because he knows Dark Cacao Cookie is watching – Shadow Milk allows a flicker of impulsivity to take over. He leans to the left, pressing a quick kiss to the side of Pure Vanilla’s cheek.

Both other Cookies in the room stiffen instantly, and Shadow Milk has to bite back a cackling laugh.

“See ya!” he calls, instantly flipping around in the air and zipping through the tent’s flaps before a single response can be mustered.

There.

That should spice up their next round of talks nicely.

Chapter 15

The Dark Cacao Kingdom's camp is, in fact, *not* a fun place.

It's something new, sure; Shadow Milk takes his time meandering along the path, taking in the sights, sounds and – ugh, smells coming from the Cream Wolves that litter the area. Even though the encampment only boasts sparse accommodations, there's certainly no shortage of weaponry lying around; most are stacked high in neatly-lined racks, though some are being polished or held tight by fists that clench as Shadow Milk drifts past.

There isn't a main cooking area – or at least, not one that Shadow Milk's noticed. The only food he's seen is packed tight as handheld rations; cacao nibs would make for a poor diet for him, but the Cookies milling around the camp seem to like it just fine. Even the Cream Wolves dinner bowls are filled with dried licorice jerky instead of tender, juicy Jellies.

Seriously, what a painfully dull sort of people.

It's clear the Dark Cacao soldiers don't think any more highly of him; everywhere Shadow Milk floats, he's accosted with suspicious stares and barely-restrained hostility. Words are muttered darkly in harsh breaths while soldiers shift agitatedly at their posts, and there's a thick tension in the air Shadow Milk can all but taste on his tongue.

He ignores it, of course. Any weapon brandished in his direction is putty – literally – in his hands. A simple flick of his wrist scatters opponents as puny as these to crumbs in the winds before they can blink. Annoyingly, they don't know that – more annoyingly, Shadow Milk is well aware that *making* that fact known will just inspire retaliatory bluster.

There is, at least, some merit in their craftsmanship. Shadow Milk isn't going to bother inspecting their weaponry now, but the fluttering banners pinned to the tents have inspired some interest. He floats up to them, leaning in to inspect the stitchwork with a curious lift of his brow. Needlepoint? No. Far too delicate for the likes of the Dark Cacao Kingdom. A canvas material, then? The purple undertones beneath the black are fascinating, lacking the depth to overpower yet somehow creating a glossy finish that Shadow Milk can't quite place.

Perhaps the material is simply too new to an ancient Cookie in a modern world. Though the breadth of Shadow Milk's knowledge is vast, ever-growing – he can't say he ever could hold a candle to Mystic Flour's hands-on expertise in textiles.

As Shadow Milk continues tilting his head, inspecting the way the banner flows in the wind, his eyes are drawn down by the sound of clashing metal; three tents over, partially obscured and to his right there seems to be some sort of practice arena that's been set up along the grounds. A few wooden fence posts have been staked into the ground, forming a ring – though Shadow Milk has to squint, he can also make out the swiftly moving forms of two Cookies clashing within it. There's a small crowd surrounding them, one or two soldiers leaning on the fence posts, along with-

Well.

Well, well, well.

Shadow Milk grins as he floats down towards the arena; his prey hasn't noticed him yet, her gaze seemingly firmly set ahead on the two soldiers duking it out in the ring. It's only when Shadow Milk is a few feet away that a warning caw rings through the air – instantly, the Cookie whips around to pin Shadow Milk with a tense stare, hand going instinctively to her weapon.

“Black Raisin Cookie!” Shadow Milk beams, clapping his hands together. “Fancy meeting you here, my dear!”

Black Raisin Cookie's eyes narrow, shining pupil glinting ominously. Her hand does not leave her weapon.

Ah. Perhaps not so instinctual, then.

Silence stretches between them; the other soldier glance between them awkwardly as Shadow Milk continues to offer her a wide grin. “Oh come *onnnnn*. It's me!”

Black Raisin Cookie says nothing, her icy stare unflinching. Her hand does, eventually, drop from her weapon – but it's only to land squarely on her hip as she continues to glare back at him.

Shadow Milk tilts his head, grin dropping to a mock pout. “Aw. You're mad at me? How come, best bud?”

“Twice.”

A blink. “What?”

“Twice,” Black Raisin Cookie repeats coldly. “You threw me. Twice.”

“Pshht.” Shadow Milk waves a hand dismissively. “You're still hung up on that? I barely nudged you!”

Black Raisin says nothing, only perking an unimpressed brow.

“Okay, yes,” Shadow Milk relents, “I did say I wouldn't do it anymore. But, come on! I helped you with the traps, didn't I? All is forgiven, no?”

A careless shrug as Black Raisin leans back against the fence post, her one arm propping her up. Still not a word; Shadow Milk's faux-pout hardens into a real frown.

“Ugh.” He rolls his eyes. “Fine. What do you want?”

“To be left in peace.” Black Raisin's stare remains decidedly unimpressed. “I have no interest in being stuck as the Cookie you come to whenever you're having issues. It's thankless, and more than a little rude.”

Shadow Milk recoils slightly in affront. “I am not having *issues*! I was inspecting a banner and spotted you across the camp, thank you very much!”

“And why,” Black Raisin replies tiredly, “are you in the Dark Cacao Kingdom camp?”

A beat of silence; Shadow Milk says nothing as Black Raisin Cookie lets out a long sigh. “Because Pure Vanilla Cookie is here,” she continues with a roll of her eyes, “and you’re having issues.”

“We are *not*—” Shadow Milk holds up a hand. “Fine. Fine! New pact.” He firmly plants a smile on his face, tilting his head politely to her. “We don’t speak of him. Deal? No talk of issues, problems, no Pure Vanilla Cookie whatsoever.”

Black Raisin Cookie looks him up and down. “Be nice if it were true,” she drawls.

“Believe you me,” Shadow Milk replies, straightening up, “I have no interest in prattling on about that old fool. Let’s talk about anything but.” He beams at her with a smile that is all teeth. “Friends again?”

A huff as Black Raisin Cookie pushes herself off the fence, hand going back to her hip. “We were friends?”

“Of course.” Shadow Milk waves his wrist; in an instant, a glistening bottle appears in his hand. “Would I procure such a lovely mid-century Boysenberry vintage for you if we weren’t?”

Black Raisin Cookie tilts her head, considering him. After a moment she extends her hand, beckoning him closer. “Bribery, huh? It’s a start.”

“I’ve found it works wonders.” Shadow Milk passes the bottle to her, watching her angle and sniff at the cork.

Black Raisin Cookie whistles sharply; there’s a flash of feathers as five crows swoop in, grabbing the bottle in their small talons before flapping away into the air. Shadow Milk watches with dry amusement as they disappear over the tops of the tents before returning his gaze to her. “Neat trick.”

“Well, I’m not going to carry it around all day.” Black Raisin then turns, putting her back to him as she nods towards the arena. “Want to watch?”

Shadow Milk floats forward, propping his elbows on the fence as he leans in next to her. There’s nothing overly remarkable about the scene – just two soldiers fighting it out, swords clashing against each other as they duck and pivot to avoid the other. There’s a finesse in it, certainly – Shadow Milk, for all his grace, cannot move like that – but it is still just a fight, and nothing more.

“Violence isn’t really my style,” he remarks, glancing over at her. “But what about you? Surprised to find you way out here.”

“I saw the banners when they were marching into town.” Black Raisin Cookie rests on her arm, eyes glued to the fight as another violent clang rings out. “Figured you were to blame and I’d need to keep an eye on it.”

“Such a hurtful assumption.”

“You didn’t disagree,” she replies with a shrug.

Shadow Milk’s lips twitch with a smile; he lets his eyes wander back to the arena. “So you just stuck around to watch them spar? Trying to learn something?”

“Always. The Dark Cacao Kingdom is unsurpassed when it comes to combat mastery.” Black Raisin Cookie cranes her neck, looking behind her for a moment before returning her gaze forward. “But I’m also waiting for someone.”

“Oh?” Shadow Milk tilts his head. “Who?”

“You wouldn’t know her.” A pause. “At least, I don’t think you would. Caramel Arrow Cookie.”

“Never heard of her.”

“She’s the First Watcher of the Dark Cacao Kingdom.” Black Raisin Cookie glances back again briefly. “I haven’t met her in person before, but Crunchy Chip Cookie described her in detail to me at the last convening of the Ancients. He delivered a letter on my behalf – Caramel Arrow Cookie and I hit it off instantly, and we’ve been pen pals ever since.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk looks her up and down, smile deepening. “Can’t say I’m surprised. You look like you’d fit right in with this bunch. So stern. So serious!”

“They don’t like raisins,” Black Raisin Cookie sighs. “They find them too sweet.”

Shadow Milk snickers to himself. “Dealbreaker, huh?”

“Unfortunately.” Black Raisin Cookie leans back slightly, stretching her arm above her head with a grimace. “I wouldn’t leave this land, anyway. Done too much to make it my home. Everyone I care about is here.”

“Even if she’s cute?”

Black Raisin’s arm immediately drops; she shoots Shadow Milk a look of pure befuddlement. “What?”

Shadow Milk shrugs, an easy smile on his lips. “Just saying. She could be cute.”

“I-” Black Raisin stares at him for a moment, before averting her eyes with an irritated huff. “Are you ever *not* annoying?”

“No,” Shadow Milk replies, fluttering his lashes for effect.

“Black Raisin Cookie!”

The pair of them look up in unison; there’s an unfamiliar Cookie jogging towards them, a Cream Wolf on his heels. Shadow Milk squints, hand coming up to shield his view from the sun – a pair of sharp, slitted eyes shine in dazzling golden hues, framed by short, black and silver locks that bob as the Cookie approaches. He comes to a stop several feet away; Shadow Milk notes with vague amusement that the other Cookie has very obviously taken note of his presence, judging by the immediate hostility in their stance.

“You!” The other Cookie points a strange, clawed weapon in Shadow Milk’s direction. “Who said you could wander around our camp, Beast?!”

“Hello, Crunchy Chip Cookie,” Black Raisin replies, lifting her hand in a short wave. “Have you seen Caramel Arrow Cookie?”

“She’s-” There’s a moment of obvious hesitation and confusion as this new Cookie – Crunchy Chip, was it? – looks uncertainly between Shadow Milk and Black Raisin Cookie. “She sent me to say she’ll be late. Tied up with something for the king. But more importantly, why is *he* here?”

Black Raisin Cookie shrugs. “Didn’t ask.”

Shadow Milk mimics the motion with a shrug of his own. “Waiting for someone.”

“Oh yeah?!” Crunchy Chip Cookie challenges, brandishing his weapon in the air. “Who?!”

Shadow Milk slowly slides his gaze over to Black Raisin Cookie; when she gives him a dubious look, he dryly replies: “I have been forbidden from saying.”

After a moment, she takes the hint – there’s a quick roll of her eyes before she sighs back: “He’s waiting for Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“Pure-” Crunchy Chip physically recoils; Shadow Milk is almost impressed by the dramatics. “Pure Vanilla Cookie is with the king! So why is the Beast that stole his land *here*?!”

“I,” Shadow Milk replies primly, “did not steal anything. Seriously, do you not keep up with the news around here? What are you, some lowly grunt?”

Crunchy Chip Cookie visibly bristles, drawing himself up to his full height as the Cream Wolf at his side snarls. “I am Crunchy Chip Cookie, captain of the Cream Wolves and defender of the Dark Cacao Kingdom. I am *no* grunt.”

“That’s worse.” Shadow Milk lofts a brow. “You get how that’s worse, right? Being so far out of the loop?”

“Enough!” Crunchy Chip Cookie takes a step forward, pointing over at the arena. “We’ll settle this on the battlefield. I’ll drive you from our camp myself!”

Shadow Milk glances backwards; the arena has indeed been emptied, its previous occupants now sitting on the side and wiping the dust from their armor. They don’t so much as glance

up as Shadow Milk continues looking them over before finally returning his gaze forward.

Hm. Could be interesting.

“Fine,” Shadow Milk says with a shrug; he glimpses Black Raisin Cookie give him a look of alarm that swiftly morphs to suspicion. “But I don’t really do the whole…” Shadow Milk waves a hand. “Wrestling in the dirt and mud thing. I’m choosing a champion to fight in my place. That’s still a thing, right? Code of Cookie chivalry and all that?”

“Very well!” Crunchy Chip Cookie places his hands on his hips, standing tall and proud. “I fear no Cookie of the Vanilla Kingdom. Bring them forth!”

“No need.” Shadow Milk turns on his heels, summoning his cane to his hand. He eyes the center of the arena, squinting as he sizes up exactly where he wants his creation to be. Shadow Milk claps his hands together, rubbing them swiftly before re-seizing his cane and pointing it straight at the arena. There’s a burst of darkness, a black ooze that surges upwards in a graceful arc before splattering to the ground in a viscous, inky puddle.

As Crunchy Chip and Black Raisin stare in disbelief, Shadow Milk shoots them both a smile and dips into a lazy bow. “Shall we, then?”

“What is that?” Crunchy Chip says incredulously, taking another step forward to peer around Shadow Milk. “That is no warrior. What have you done?”

“Go find out. Shadow Milk lifts his cane, flicking it upwards – only to send Crunchy Chip Cookie abruptly sailing overhead into the arena.

A furious shout is accompanied by the sound of Crunchy Chip landing heavily in the dirt; as Shadow Milk smiles to himself, he catches Black Raisin Cookie shooting him a glare. “Oh please,” he says dismissively. “I didn’t throw *you*.”

Crunchy Chip Cookie immediately scrambles to his feet, whirling around with a furious cry; his Cream Wolf, left behind, rushes over to the fence, planting its paws on the wood and letting out a mournful whine. “Stay, buddy!” Crunchy Chip orders, before immediately snapping his gaze back to Shadow Milk. “Hey! Stop messing around! Get in here and fight!”

“I’m not the one you should be keeping an eye on,” Shadow Milk replies mildly, folding his hands behind his head as he reclines in the air. “Might want to look behind you?”

Crunchy Chip Cookie scoffs, turning his head – only for his sneer to immediately drop off his face.

The ooze is rising up, shuddering as it begins to take shape. Inky black solidifies into two arms, two legs, a familiar, spiky fringe; it’s not long until Shadow Milk’s creation is fully formed, staring across the arena with two jet-black, unblinking eyes.

Crunchy Chip Cookie takes an uneasy step back, eyes never once straying from the oozing doppelganger standing before him. “What-?”

“What *is* that?” Black Raisin Cookie demands.

“A mimic.” Shadow Milk shrugs his shoulders. “Or, well. One of my mimics. Perfectly copies whatever foe it sees.” He grins, all teeth. “You like it?”

“You intend for me... to do battle with myself?” Crunchy Chip Cookie wonders aloud, already shifting into a defensive stance.

“Why not? Couldn’t have a fairer fight, hm?” Shadow Milk lifts his hands, clapping twice. “Oh, Oozy! Game on!”

The mimic stiffens; it’s the only warning Crunchy Chip Cookie will get before the mimic’s lunging towards him with blinding speed. Shadow Milk cackles, floating higher in the air as Crunchy Chip stumbles, arms wildly coming up to block the furious blows being hurled upon him. The mimic slices through the air with its talons, missing Crunchy Chip by a hair – the Cream Wolf snarls at the fence, already trying to heave itself up to join its master.

Pointless. With a swift strike to his knees, Crunchy Chip falls forward with a cry-

The mimic’s claws pierce his throat.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes as Black Raisin lets out a startled gasp. “Calm down. He’s fine.”

As soon as the words have left Shadow Milk’s lips, they’re proven true; the mimic immediately drops to the ground, splattering back to ooze as Crunchy Chip frantically grasps at his throat. He’s gasping for breath, eyes wide – yet when his shaking hands leave his neck, there’s not a scratch to be found. All that remains are a few inky droplets, slowly dripping down to the ground.

“It’s just ooze,” Shadow Milk calls out, a sly grin on his face. “It’s not going to crumble you. Sheesh, so dramatic.” He twists in the air, flipping upside-down as he clasps his hands behind his back. “But, ah – think I won there, no?”

“That was...” Crunchy Chip continues to massage his neck, staring blankly ahead even as his Cream Wolf whines and nudges at his face. “That was...”

“Pathetic?” Shadow Milk supplies cheekily. “Humiliating?”

Crunchy Chip whips his head up, eyes shining as he grins ear to ear. “AMAZING!!”

Shadow Milk’s smile instantly drops. “What.”

“Incredible!” Crunchy Chip Cookie is scrabbling up to his feet, pumping his fist in the air. “To battle myself – what an opportunity! I never noticed how I favor my left – how I shift to the side before my signature leg sweep! There’s so much to learn, to improve like this!” He fixes Shadow Milk with an eager grin, pointing straight in his direction. “Again, Beast! Let me go again!”

Black Raisin lets out a muffled laugh from the sides; Shadow Milk can feel his eye twitch, disbelief and annoyance mixing together all at once. He lifts a hand, massaging his temple before muttering: “Of all the- no. Okay? No.”

“Please!” Crunchy Chip Cookie swivels on his heels, kicking the puddle of ooze with vigor. “Come on! Make it stand up and fight me again!”

“Oh, for- it doesn’t work like that!” Shadow Milk flips himself around again, arms now folding across his chest. “The fight’s over. It won. It’s not going to get up again until there’s a new foe.”

“Really?” Black Raisin Cookie’s curious tone draws Shadow Milk’s irritable gaze. “May I have a go, then?”

“Seriously?” Shadow Milk replies incredulously. “You too?”

“Why not?” Black Raisin Cookie plants her hand on the fence post, hoisting herself over into the arena. “As he said, it’s a rare opportunity to get to fight myself.” A pause as she looks him over. “You said it *won’t* crumble me, right?”

“No, it won’t-” Shadow Milk throws his arms up. “You know what? Fine! All you meatheads go fight the stupid mimic. What do I care?”

“Really?” An unfamiliar voice joins the fray; Shadow Milk turns his head, staring down in exasperation at the two soldiers approaching from the side. “May we join as well?”

“Hang on.” A guard at a nearby tent steps away from his post, sword gleaming in the light. “I was watching that fight. I want a turn before my shift changes.”

Shadow Milk can only stare in disbelief as more and more Cookies begin convening on the arena, a steady murmur rising to an excited clamor as a line – a *line* – begins to form at the entrance. Crunchy Chip Cookie is already excitedly hurrying to the back, Cream Wolf in tow; in the arena, Black Raisin Cookie is shifting into her battle stance, weapon drawn and at the ready. The ooze shudders violently, drawing itself up as it begins to reform; Shadow Milk can only cover his eyes with his hands, letting out a long sigh.

Figures. The first crowd he’s pulled in ages, and all they want is a wrestling match.

Philistines.

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Shadow Milk’s not sure how much time passes from that point.

It’s been a few hours at least, judging by how steeply the sun’s set in the sky. A brisk afternoon has now faded into the chilled golden hues of evening, a pleasant wind ruffling his hair as Shadow Milk reclines in mid-air and watches the ever-rotating spectacle before him.

The Dark Cacao Kingdom soldiers are a tenacious bunch, he’ll give them that. Their fervor for battle hasn’t diminished an inch, the line for the arena stretching out well past the tents.

The battles are never terribly long, either; perhaps it's the surprise factor of how perfectly the mimic matches their movements or perhaps it's just the novelty of it all, but Shadow Milk's creation has yet to lose a single match. Black Raisin Cookie had been the most impressive – she'd lasted nearly the longest, had the flashiest display compared to the foot soldiers – but still, she too had fallen to a blade through her heart.

She now reclines in the air next to him, supported by a plush floating chair and sipping on a fresh glass of juice Shadow Milk had so generously provided.

Never let it be said he's not a good host.

The fights aren't terribly interesting, but they pass the time. It's amusing to watch the soldiers eagerly throw themselves into the ring, get soundly beaten in record time, only to happily scramble to their feet and get right back in line. Crunchy Chip Cookie's gone at least seven rounds, even involving his Cream Wolf once – though the mimic lacks the capability to muster two forms at once, it had thrashed them thoroughly once again.

Shadow Milk's swirling his own glass of berry juice, idly watching yet another soldier trade blows back and forth; just as he brings the glass to his lips, a familiar voice floats up from below.

“Having fun?”

The glass lowers; Shadow Milk turns his head to see Pure Vanilla smiling up at him from a few feet away. His eyes are crinkled in gentle mirth, his hands folded together and tucked into the sleeves of his robes to protect against the evening chill. He tilts his head as Shadow Milk meets his gaze, smile deepening ever so slightly.

Annoyingly, Dark Cacao Cookie is standing right behind him.

“Just watching the show,” Shadow Milk says after a moment, turning back towards the fight – only to have it immediately end with a blade through the soldier's throat. The ooze sinks down, dissipating back into a harmless puddle even as Dark Cacao makes a low noise of disapproval in response.

“What magic is this?” he demands, footsteps heavy as he strides towards the fence. The soldiers in line immediately flinch, dipping into low bows and sending nervous glances his way – which, to be fair, Shadow Milk is more than certain half of them are shirking their duties. Dark Cacao's heavy gaze travels across the arena, his lips drawn into a deep frown. “Why are my soldiers amassed here? What have you done?”

“Nothing,” Shadow Milk sighs, rolling his eyes. “They're just playing.” He glances over to Black Raisin Cookie; she and Pure Vanilla are sharing a silent glance, both smiling at the other. She raises her glass to him as he lifts a hand, covering his mouth in a silent laugh.

“Sir!” There's a new Cookie jogging up to Dark Cacao's side – she's wholly unfamiliar to Shadow Milk, dressed in dark robes with a heavy bow at her back. Her ponytail whips to the side as she sharply turns her head – and seemingly spots Black Raisin Cookie, to whom she

gives a suddenly-brightened expression and grin before immediately snapping a solemn look back to her king. “Sir, the guard by the entrance is missing from his post.”

Shadow Milk’s idle gaze is drawn by the movement of the sixth soldier in line slowly ducking down out of sight.

“Is this your game, then?” Dark Cacao’s stern glare is directed back up to Shadow Milk, hand resting heavily on his sword. “Distract my men and cause chaos in my camp?”

“They’re *playing*,” Shadow Milk repeats in a drawl. “Or, I guess, training for them. Just a little bit of sport, Bitterbrows.”

“What is it?” Pure Vanilla has stepped up to the fence, lifting his staff as he peers at the puddle. “Shadow magic?”

“Obviously.” Shadow Milk nods towards the inky blot on the floor. “It’s a mimic. Copies whatever foe it sees and dishes their own moves back at them. Non-lethal, before you ask.”

“How interesting.” Pure Vanilla sets his staff down, expression brightening. “And how thoughtful of you to provide such relevant entertainment for our guests.”

The last bit seems directed at Dark Cacao Cookie, judging by the way he replies with a low grunt. His expression isn’t pleased in the least.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, framing Dark Cacao’s stoic stare with his hands as he squints. “Let’s see what it does with old Bitterbrows, shall we?”

“Oh.” Pure Vanilla’s eyes widen. “Wait, hold on. I don’t think that’s-”

Shadow Milk’s already flicked his hand towards the arena; a pulse of magic zips through the air, arcing over the fence and splashing down into the ooze below. There’s a shudder, a violent shake as the ooze begins to bubble and quiver, rising from the ground up and up-

And up.

Shadow Milk’s only warning is a sizzling electricity in the wind before an explosion rocks the arena, sending him tumbling back.

As he struggles to right himself, there’s a windstorm surging all around them, tearing through the tents and sending several fence posts flying. The mimic is hunched over, an indistinguishable mass of darkness with a pulsing red aura radiating off it – its sheer presence cracks the ground, head fixed with empty white sockets tilting back with a sickening crack. Its mouth gapes wide with a deafening roar that sends a rippling shockwave through the crowd. The soldiers have all hit the ground, Pure Vanilla is shouting something indistinguishable; it’s a struggle even to lift his cane but Shadow Milk finally, finally seizes hold of his magic and slices it through the air like a blade.

The mimic freezes; the air stills around them. With a final shudder, it drops to the ground, splattering back into a puddle. Slowly the ooze begins fizzling out, dissipating back into the air with a sad gurgling sound before finally disappearing from view.

Shadow Milk blinks, hand raising to unconsciously smooth back his hair as he stares at the spot the mimic had stood.

There's a sound. It's not a laugh, not even close – but there's an amused sort of huff behind him. Shadow Milk slowly turns his head to see Dark Cacao meeting his shocked gaze with a lift of his massive brow.

“Perhaps,” he says slowly, “it is you who underestimate *my* power, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk's mouth opens – a pause, several retorts on his lips falling short as he stares back at the other.

“Well,” Pure Vanilla cuts in, stepping between them as he smooths out his robe. “That was... illuminating! But, it is growing late. Perhaps we should head up to the castle for dinner?”

Dark Cacao Cookie grunts, lowering his head back to Pure Vanilla with an openly softened gaze. “I have no objections. I may not share your taste in fine cuisine, but the Vanilla Kingdom's fare has never disappointed.”

Shadow Milk bites his lip, suppressing another eye roll. Great. He has to go suffer through a meal with this suck-up?

Pure Vanilla smiles back at the other before glancing back. “Shadow Milk Cookie?”

A sigh as Shadow Milk floats downwards, hands folding behind his back. “Yes, yes, I'm-”

“I'll be busy the rest of the night.” Pure Vanilla smiles at him. “I'll see you tomorrow, alright?”

Shadow Milk freezes in mid-air. He blinks, unable to keep the flash of disbelief from crossing his face. “You- what?”

Yet Pure Vanilla's already turned away, placing a hand on Dark Cacao's arm. “Shall we, then?” he asks, motioning to the path with his staff.

Dark Cacao grunts again, but there's a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes. Shadow Milk can only stare in open, abject disbelief as the pair of them walk away without another word, disappearing around a bend and out of sight.

Above him, still floating in her chair, Black Raisin Cookie lets out a loud, undignified snort.

“Okay.” Shadow Milk lifts his blank gaze to her as she grins down at him from above. “I'm taking back the deal. I want to hear about this.” She then nods to the other Cookie still remaining, shooting her a grin.

“Caramel Arrow Cookie. Mind if we bring one more with us out drinking tonight?”

Caramel Arrow Cookie is not bad company.

Shadow Milk doesn't spend much of the night talking with her; that role is relegated to Black Raisin Cookie, who is more than eager to step in. The two, despite claims of never meeting, seem to get along like two peas in a pod, chatting away with the speed and familiarity of two long-time friends. Even within the dingy confines of the Crow's Nest Inn, their animated faces shine brightly as they swap stories around the table, flickering candlelight casting dancing shadows across their ever-emptying mugs.

The stories are of mild interest. Shadow Milk tunes in every so often, more so when Caramel Arrow Cookie speaks, to listen to her tales about the Dark Cacao Kingdom, her heroic exploits at the borders, the beasts she's felled in her king's name. The reverence with which she speaks of Dark Cacao Cookie is deeply annoying, but unsurprising – seems all the soldiers look up to the big hulking lug in one way or another.

Caramel Arrow Cookie treats him - fine. There's a wariness to her, a caution that Shadow Milk appreciates far more than she knows. Black Raisin Cookie sets her mind at ease with gentle words and teasing jibes Shadow Milk's way – it's for show, but he doesn't care. They largely don't involve him in the conversation, and he doesn't ask to be included. Caramel Arrow Cookie still keeps a watchful eye on him through it all, and Shadow Milk –

Well. He's been spending the last hour nursing what feels like his sixth drink, but might be his seventh.

His chin is tucked sullenly over the edge of the table, body slumped forward with his arms dangling limply at his sides. He's disguised as his old sailor persona, but he'd barely put any effort into it – he's pretty sure this character had a beard before, but Shadow Milk can't bring himself to care.

The booze is poor, but passable, even if it carries a revolting undercurrent of raisin-y notes. It doesn't feel like a night to sip upon his best; this is a night to drink whatever's put in front of him, in as large a quantity as he can handle.

Which he may have tiptoed past somewhere around drink five.

Frankly, he's surprised Caramel Arrow Cookie seems the most composed out of the three of them; a soldier like her seems hardly suited to drinking the rest of them under the table. It's not until she offhandedly mentions the Dark Cacao Kingdom's famed root schnapps that the situation clicks and Shadow Milk wrinkles his brow in distaste.

Ugh. These Cookies and their fondness for everything bitter.

Eventually the tables begin to be cleared and the barkeep ushers them out; Caramel Arrow Cookie helps Black Raisin up, who is slumped over and three-quarters unconscious by this point. As amusing as it'd been to see her try to keep up with them, Shadow Milk can't help but smirk at how thoroughly she'd been outclassed.

At least, he tries to smirk, but the uneasy wobble in his floating and spinning room make it a bit difficult.

They say their goodbyes outside; Caramel Arrow Cookie is surprisingly polite, remarking something about ‘actually enjoying his company’ that Shadow Milk doesn’t have the mental energy to take offense to. As she waves and turns to escort the stumbling Black Raisin Cookie home, Shadow Milk finds himself idly floating higher and higher; a quick glance down confirms that, yes, he’s being carried along by the wind.

Whatever.

Drifting through the air feels nice, a refreshing palette cleanser to the stuffiness of the inn. Shadow Milk flips over to float on his back, letting himself drift over the rooftops with his hands folded on his chest. His blurry gaze is directed upwards, tracing idly over the pattern of stars overhead that wink and flicker against the endless black. The moon hangs high in the sky, a silvery crescent that winks whenever he gives her so much as a glance.

Still mocking him, apparently.

Shadow Milk lets his eyes slip shut, focusing on the feeling of the cold wind brushing against his dough. His thoughts feel muddled, tacky and strange – the alcohol isn’t helping, sure, but he’d been feeling slightly off for a while now. It’s hard to place exactly what it is, but several unpleasant memories threaten to resurface beneath closed lids.

Dark Cacao Cookie is a problem, to be sure; a huge, imposing presence that’s stomped its way into Shadow Milk’s life and disrupted what he now realizes to have been a fragile peace. The Cookie is annoyingly stubborn and stoic, protective to a fault over his dearest, darlingest-

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Shadow Milk can feel his grip on his arms tighten slightly; there’s a quiet huff as he forces himself to relax, pushes back the tension that had instantly crept through his dough. Pure Vanilla Cookie is... another problem. Complicated is the word for it. It’s much easier to not think about him than to examine the – *everything* surrounding his annoyingly fond gaze.

It hadn’t been an issue when that gaze was directed solely at Shadow Milk, but now? It’s... difficult to put into words, but the sight of it resting on Dark Cacao’s broad shoulders, the way Pure Vanilla had so comfortably placed his hand on the other’s arm-

Logically, it’s perfectly sensible. They are two Ancients, brothers in arms. Of course they’d have a connection, of course Pure Vanilla is perfectly at ease in his company. Shadow Milk hadn’t even *wanted* to go to their prissy little dinner. If Pure Vanilla had asked, Shadow Milk would have just refused anyway. Probably. Maybe.

Pure Vanilla hadn’t asked.

The feeling of anger in his chest is strange; the emotion is not foreign, but the source of it feels – intangible. If there’s a word for it, Shadow Milk’s struggling to give it a name. It feels compounded by the dull knowledge that Pure Vanilla himself is also angry, angry at *him*. It’s

not like Shadow Milk had meant to drag this scowling hulk to their doorstep. And yes, Pure Vanilla had acknowledged that and yes, he'd been caring and understanding, hidden away in that closet from all prying eyes as he'd squeezed Shadow Milk's hand with that oh-so familiar gentleness-

Shadow Milk sticks out his tongue, eyes scrunching up as a vile bubble of gas rises in his throat. Ugh. He really had drunk too much.

Whatever. This... conundrum is hardly suited to be solved while he's in this state. There's only one thing to do. Forget about this mess, these invaders, Pure Vanilla Cookie's infuriatingly patient gaze and hop straight into bed. Sleep off his inevitable hangover, avoid the two decrepit old Ancients for the rest of the visit, and wait out this nasty little hiccup in his existence until it's over. A fine plan. Solid. No flaws, no reason to divert.

Which is why it's so very puzzling that only twenty minutes later, Shadow Milk now finds himself floating right outside Pure Vanilla's balcony.

Even through his blurry vision, Shadow Milk can make out movement within. Pure Vanilla is seated at his desk, writing by what seems to be steadily flickering candlelight. The other has a quill in hand, scratching out something or other while surrounded by stacks and stacks of papers – but honestly, when isn't he? Work, work and more work, that's all he does. All for a kingdom he doesn't even rule.

Shadow Milk glides to the balcony's edge, crossing his legs as he settles on the railing. The stony surface is unpleasantly cold, bleeding through to his dough – but Shadow Milk feels far too wobbly to keep himself upright in the air any longer. He places his palms on the marble, idly brushing his hand along its corrugated surface as he keeps his hazy gaze trained on Pure Vanilla Cookie.

The other hasn't noticed him – not that Shadow Milk's made so much as a peep. Instead, Pure Vanilla is hunched over the table, scratching the side of his head as his milky eyes pour over the pages; there's even a bit of a squint to his brow, as if he's trying to make out the squiggles in the dark. It's endearing- no. Amusing. The other's eyesight is so poor, beyond useless at any great distance, yet still he tries to fumble his way through what little he can see up close in the dimmest light possible.

Pure Vanilla lifts his quill, idly nibbling on its feathery tip – and the familiarity of the motion sends a pulse of warmth through Shadow Milk's Soul Jam.

Instantly, Pure Vanilla pauses; his hand comes up to touch his own Soul Jam. His head then turns, gaze snapping exactly to where Shadow Milk sat perched on the balcony.

Shadow Milk scowls, shooting an irritable glare down at his brooch.

Traitor.

Pure Vanilla sets his quill down and pushes himself up from the desk; Shadow Milk can see his outline dip between the windows before the lock on the balcony turns with an audible

click. The door swings open to reveal Pure Vanilla in full, dressed in his nightgown and with that familiar, damnable smile on his face.

“Shadow Milk Cookie.” Quiet. Gentle. That same fond gaze, trained on Shadow Milk alone. Just for him and no one else. “You’re still awake?”

A shrug as Shadow Milk leans on his right arm, swaying slightly from the motion. He doesn’t feel like answering such a non-question – clearly he’s awake. He’s right here, watching as Pure Vanilla steps out onto the balcony and shuts the door behind him.

If Pure Vanilla is discouraged by the silence, he doesn’t show it. He merely folds his hands in front of himself, a considering tilt to his head as his smile deepens. “How have you been passing the night, my friend?”

Shadow Milk puffs out his cheeks, blowing a steady stream of breath into the air; apparently it’s effective, because Pure Vanilla’s face scrunches slightly before Shadow Milk cheekily replies: “Drinking.”

“Goodness.” Pure Vanilla waves a hand in front of his face, wafting the scent away. “Yes, I can smell that. Were you out with Black Raisin Cookie again?”

“Maybe.” Shadow Milk lets his dangling legs sway back and forth, kicking idly as he considers the man in front of him. “What do you care?”

Pure Vanilla lowers his hand, immediately gracing Shadow Milk with another revoltingly calm smile. “I’m simply glad you’ve made a friend. Black Raisin Cookie is a wonderfully kind and caring Cookie.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Thought you said I should stay away from her?” An inelegant burp follows; he doesn’t bother to wave it away. “Snorer.”

A sigh as Pure Vanilla’s shoulders sag; it’s dramatic, a show of exaggerated reluctance. “If I must suffer old stories of my faults being swapped between you two, so be it. I accept my fate.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk leans to the left, feeling his vision temporarily blur before he blinks it away. “And what about you?”

Pure Vanilla blinks back. “Me?”

“How was *your* night?” Shadow Milk doesn’t like his own tone, the inflection of hostility he hadn’t meant to add. “Your *dinner*.”

“It went well.” Pure Vanilla smiles back, not even having the decency to match Shadow Milk’s scowl. “I enjoyed catching up with Dark Cacao Cookie. We had much to discuss. He was kind enough to bring tea from his kingdom as a gift; I think you’d like it.”

Shadow Milk scoffs, casually averting his gaze with a roll of his eyes. He says nothing before sullenly adding: “And? What did you *discuss*? His plans to cut off my head? Jokes on him, it comes off naturally.”

“Yes, it was very alarming the first time you showed me.” Pure Vanilla’s crossing the balcony, placing a hand on the railing as he looks up at Shadow Milk. “May I join you?”

Another scoff as Shadow Milk eyes him over. “You’ll fall.”

“You’ll catch me if I do.” Pure Vanilla hoists himself up, scooching his robes out from under him as he settles down beside Shadow Milk. He folds his hands in his lap, looking over before continuing with: “But, yes. We did talk about you.”

“And?” Shadow Milk prompts again, forbidding the instinct to lean closer. Even only a few inches apart, the warmth Pure Vanilla’s presence exudes is alarmingly enticing. “What’s my verdict?”

Pure Vanilla smiles. “He doesn’t like you.”

“Shocking,” Shadow Milk drawls. “It’s mutual, by the way.”

“Oh, I know. I expected nothing less from the pair of you.” Pure Vanilla lifts his gaze to the sky, as if studying what could be little more than colorful blurs above him. “He doesn’t trust you. He’s worried I’m being manipulated and compared you to a Cake Hound I once found by the road that then bit me once I’d healed it.”

“How apt.”

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues, “I have also made it clear that this is my kingdom, and he is not the one who decides if you stay or go.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk tilts his head, lazily appraising Pure Vanilla’s form. “And is *he* staying or going?”

“Staying.”

Great.

“For a bit. He does have a kingdom to run, after all.” Pure Vanilla finally lowers his gaze, meeting Shadow Milk’s searching eyes with a placid smile. “But, I am not opposed. I think it will give him the opportunity to get to know you better.”

Shadow Milk sighs, letting his head loll back. “Ugh, why bother? It’s not like our first meeting went great. He’s soooo cranky.”

“Actually,” Pure Vanilla remarks, “I think it went better than I expected.”

A blink before Shadow Milk levels Pure Vanilla with an incredulous stare. “Seriously? I thought you’d be a little angrier about it.”

“Well, I don’t think you needed to trap him in an illusion to make your point. That really unsettled him.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze narrows, ever so slightly. “Please do not do so again.”

Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder, pretending indifference.

“However,” Pure Vanilla continues, “when he explained what had happened, I was surprised to hear you were remarkably truthful.”

A snap of his head as Shadow Milk physically recoils. “I was *not*.”

“You were.” Pure Vanilla smiles, an amused gleam in his eyes. “I’ve been noticing that, you know. You’ve been becoming more truthful around me.”

Shadow Milk’s own eyes narrow. “Such nasty words from a Cookie within shoving distance of a long way down.” A huff as he looks away again. “I have *not* been more truthful. *You*’ve simply taken to deceit.” He suddenly whips his head back around, pinning Pure Vanilla with an accusing stare. “Have you noticed that? I have. Sly little comments, trying to manipulate me with your little touches and glances. Don’t think you’re getting away with it.”

“Perhaps.” Pure Vanilla shrugs his own shoulders, smile unyielding. “We’ve been together quite some time now. I think it’s hardly surprising that we’ve begun reflecting parts of the other.” His smile widens. “Truth and Deceit are inseparable, no?”

“I prefer the other phrase.” Shadow Milk cocks a brow. “The one about a blade's edge?”

Pure Vanilla laughs; it rings clearly through the night air, a fragment of warmth that blossoms unbidden in Shadow Milk’s chest. “Perhaps,” Pure Vanilla repeats again, eyes lidding slightly. “Though I like mine better.”

“You’re being sweet to me.” The words tip off Shadow Milk’s tongue before he can stop them, tumbling out with a wince before he sharply looks away. “Knock it off.”

“I like being sweet to you.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is gentle, alluring. “I like it when you let me.”

“You’re angry with me.” Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest, refusing to meet the other’s gaze. “Why pretend otherwise? You’re getting better at deceit than you think.”

Pure Vanilla hums. “Why am I angry with you?”

Shadow Milk’s brow scrunches; he glances back with an incredulous scoff. “What? Why are you asking me? It’s your stupid anger.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla admits, “but I’d like to hear your thoughts on the *why*.” A shift as he scoots just a little closer. “You’re an excellent debater. Tell me why I’m angry, and show me if my reasons are unsound.”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk scans him suspiciously. “And what do I get if I win this *debate* of yours?”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes fully close as he replies: “Then you may spend the night in my bed.”

Shadow Milk scoffs; yet, despite the pleasant buzz of inebriation, he suddenly feels more alert than before. He tilts his head, visibly considering while Pure Vanilla waits him out.

Finally, he drawls: “Alright. You’re angry because I oh-so delicately transported you out the window.”

“In my bedclothes.”

“But,” Shadow Milk counters, lolling his head to the side, “Dark Cacao Cookie demanded I return you to him. So, really, I was just doing what your dearest comrade asked.”

“And why,” Pure Vanilla muses, “is Dark Cacao Cookie here in the first place?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Because I sent him a letter that he very clearly should have taken as a joke.”

“Despite the fact you knew full well he is not the type of Cookie to be making such jokes with.”

A sigh as Shadow Milk places a hand to his chest and leans back. “Is a magnificent creature such as myself to be blamed for the shortcomings of other Cookies?” He straightens up again, shaking out his head. “Anyways. You’re happy to have him here. You got to reunite and have *dinner* and exchange all your insipid little stories.”

“That’s true,” Pure Vanilla concedes. “I am happy to see him again.”

“So you shouldn’t be angry.”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head to the side again. “Really? That’s your best attempt?”

Shadow Milk throws up his hand in the air in exasperation. “Fine. You’re angry because by bringing him, I risked your life with the threat of him running me through, and you getting the sharp end of that stick.”

“Close.”

Shadow Milk sweeps him with a suspicious gaze. “Only close?”

“I am angry,” Pure Vanilla says quietly, “because you hurt my friend and risked the wellbeing of my people. Had Dark Cacao Cookie felt compelled to take the castle to try and stop you, my soldiers could have been injured or even crumbled in my defense. The armies sweeping through the streets terrified the civilians, and my friend sailed here for days with a heart clenched with fear for my safety.” Pure Vanilla’s hands clasp together tightly in his lap as he lets out a long, drawn-out sigh. “I am angry because you risked your own safety as well. We are tied by our bond, yes, but it does not mean I do not feel fear when you are threatened. And it does not mean I cannot help but feel upset that you would do something so reckless without even considering what it could mean for the people around you, least of all yourself.”

Silence stretches between them; Shadow Milk’s staring down at the ground, absently watching his legs swing back and forth. Finally, he mutters: “He couldn’t hurt me. Not really.”

“I think you underestimate him.” Pure Vanilla lifts his head back towards the sky. “When pitted against each other, I think he may surprise you if you aren’t careful. He is not a Cookie to be taken lightly, especially when protecting the ones he cares for.”

“Whatever.” Shadow Milk kicks a leg out, pointing it straight for a moment before letting it drop. “If you’re so angry, then why bother acting all sweet? Make up your mind.”

“Just because I’m angry with you doesn’t mean I stop caring for you.” Shadow Milk imperceptibly flinches as he feels a hand cover his own. “Nor does it mean I enjoy feeling like this.” A gentle squeeze. “If I listened to my desires and nothing else, you would already be with me beneath the sheets.”

Too soft. Too sticky-sweet, too-

Shadow Milk feels far too unsteady when he meets Pure Vanilla’s gentled gaze. “So let me. Let me stay.”

Another squeeze as Pure Vanilla’s expression flickers with sadness. “Not tonight. But…” A small smile. “Only for tonight. Tomorrow, when I rise for breakfast, I would like you to join me.” Pure Vanilla scoots closer; he’s mere inches away now, his free hand rising to gently rest on Shadow Milk’s cheek. “I would like to spend the day with you, knowing that you understand and accept my anger, and see the error in your approach.” His eyes flutter shut; he leans in and Shadow Milk allows it, allows him to press their foreheads together in unspoken tenderness. “Tomorrow,” Pure Vanilla murmurs softly, “I would like to be sweet to you.”

The touch to his cheek stirs Shadow Milk’s memory; as hazy and warm as he feels, he still musters the will to lick his lips and whisper back: “What did he say?”

Pure Vanilla’s hand runs up, sliding through Shadow Milk’s hair as he hums. “Hm?”

“Dark Cacao Cookie.” Shadow Milk tilts his head slightly, brushing against Pure Vanilla’s own. “When I-”

“When you?” Pure Vanilla prompts, smile soft and teasing.

Teasing. Shadow Milk’s being teased.

“Never mind,” he sighs.

Pure Vanilla nuzzles back as if in apology, giving Shadow Milk’s hand another squeeze. “He didn’t say anything.”

Shadow Milk blinks, fog momentarily clearing. “What? Really?”

“I’m afraid to inform you,” Pure Vanilla says with a smile, “that such a gesture is commonplace for many Cookies saying their farewells. Perhaps it was not as such in your day, but I’m afraid my friend may have grown quite numb to it during his time in Hollyberry Cookie’s kingdom. He said not a word in query.”

Oh. Disappointing.

Pure Vanilla then leans to the right, pressing a gentle kiss of his own to Shadow Milk's cheek. As he draws away, he murmurs: "I think this is our farewell too, my friend. I must rest well for tomorrow – and I hope you will too."

"I won't," Shadow Milk mutters back, petulance returning as Pure Vanilla hops off the railing.

Pure Vanilla flashes him a smile, fond and amused in equal measure, before placing his hand on the balcony door. "Goodnight, Shadow Milk Cookie."

Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest. "You'll get cold without me," he calls. "You'll see."

"Yes," Pure Vanilla muses, "I will." He pushes the doors open and steps through; they swiftly shut, locks clicking back into place as Shadow Milk is once again left alone in the chilly night air.

He finds his head tilting upwards, staring tiredly into the starry sky as the moon gleams brightly overhead. A slight shiver crawls up his spine; he ignores it in favor of directing a pointed glare up at the moon grinning back at him.

At least she's alone tonight too.

Chapter 16

Over the next day, Shadow Milk figures out two things.

The first comes the immediate morning after his drunken binge; as Shadow Milk wakes to a pounding headache and the taste of ash in his mouth, he is graced with the thoroughly unpleasant realization that this body is just as ill-suited for hangovers as it is for beastly transformations. Granted, he'd been pushing it – after Pure Vanilla's exit Shadow Milk had, perhaps, summoned his own private reserve and he had also, perhaps, indulged in another bottle or two to drown out the unhappiness radiating through his jam. But in all fairness, the drink had hardly been too much compared to what he could handle before.

Dimly, he notes to give Dark Enchantress Cookie a nasty review next time they cross paths; shell body does *not* meet expectations.

Pushing himself up from the floor – he hadn't made it to his bed, sue him – Shadow Milk rubs the drool from the corner of his mouth and scowls at the slim rays of morning sun peeking in through the curtains. For all his best efforts to keep his room as dark and dim as possible, there always seems to be an annoying little sliver of light trying to sneak its way in at a moment's notice. With how sharply Shadow Milk's head pangs with every blink, the sight of it is especially unwelcome today.

Keeping his corporeal form afloat feels like far too much effort; rather than try to pull himself together, Shadow Milk lets himself collapse into the shadows, exhaustedly crawling his way across the floor towards the door. He slips under the frame, slinking along the slim shadows as busy servants whisk along the halls – their footfalls, though prim and softened by the carpet, still thud painfully in Shadow Milk's head.

Blugh.

By the time Shadow Milk's dragged himself down to the kitchens, the first hints of nausea have bloomed into full-blown queasiness. He doesn't bother reforming even as he slips through the cracks in the ceiling, tiny viscous droplets trickling down before his full form abruptly slides through and thuds wetly on the table below.

Pure Vanilla looks up from his bowl of cereal, spoon poised at his mouth. He gives Shadow Milk's inky, misshapen mass a curious once-over; Shadow Milk summons the will to form one single eye, if only to give the other a sullen glare.

The fond little smile that greets him in return does little to settle Shadow Milk's already-churning stomach.

"Good morning," Pure Vanilla says, eyes lidded with amusement. He pops his spoon into his mouth, taking a quick swallow before continuing: "Are we experiencing the consequences of our actions today?"

Shadow Milk's form bubbles irritably before slumping back down again.

“Poor thing.” Pure Vanilla takes another spoonful of cereal before holding it out towards Shadow Milk. “Here. Eat something first. If your head’s hurting you really should hydrate, you know.”

Ugh. Healer Cookie at it again. Shadow Milk’s lone eye narrows at the spoon being offered towards him. Like he’s a child, or a pet. He snakes a tendril out, taking hold of the utensil in a delicate grasp-

Before abruptly yanking it from Pure Vanilla’s hand and shoving it down Shadow Milk’s void-like mouth, spoon and all.

Shadow Milk chews loudly, crunching on the metal as he stubbornly stares Pure Vanilla’s astonished expression down. It’s all for effect, just using a flicker of magic to melt the silver away into nothingness – but Shadow Milk enjoys the shock value of this little trick nonetheless.

After a few startled blinks, Pure Vanilla’s eyes simply crinkle in mirth as he huffs a soft laugh. “Goodness. Alright then.” A glance down at his bowl, then back up to Shadow Milk with an amused smile. “What am I meant to eat with now? Hm?”

A silvery tongue protrudes from Shadow Milk’s inky mass to blow a loud, wet raspberry.

Pure Vanilla chuckles again, lifting his head as he motions to a nearby servant. “Another spoon, please. And a glass of milk for my friend.”

The rest of the meal passes in relative quiet, only punctured by Pure Vanilla’s delicate chewing and Shadow Milk’s begrudging sips of milk. The beverage helps, a little, though it sits oddly in his stomach. He still hasn’t bothered reforming, choosing to just crawl to the top of the glass for an occasional drink before sliding morosely back down to the table.

His antics seem to amuse Pure Vanilla, who is watching him carefully with fond eyes.

“Better?” Pure Vanilla prompts, once Shadow Milk’s finally drained the glass.

Shadow Milk squints at him, extending his tongue to blow another raspberry in the other’s direction.

Another laugh as Pure Vanilla folds his arms on the table. “You know, I could help with your headache. I am a healer, after all.”

While true, Shadow Milk is in no mood to have Light magic slapped all over him. He rolls his singular eye, begrudgingly pulling himself out of the shadows as his body slowly reforms around him. There’s an ugly, violent shudder – ugh. It’s worse, so much worse like this. The lights are too bright, the sounds even louder; Shadow Milk squints his eyes and opens his mouth, ready to spit out his refusal-

Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches up, gently pressing against his forehead.

The sudden touch is startling; the pulse of magic sinking into Shadow Milk’s dough even more so. It’s warm, but overly so, like standing an inch too close to a furnace. The magic

singes strangely in his jam, making him wince before Shadow Milk rapidly bats Pure Vanilla's hand away. "Stop it," he hisses, covering his forehead as he scowls. "Sheesh! Hot hands, much?"

"Oh?" Pure Vanilla pulls his arm away, expression morphing to one of surprise. "Does that hurt you? My apologies, I did not mean to-"

"It doesn't-" Shadow Milk sighs sharply, rubbing at the spot Pure Vanilla's hand had lain. "This body's made out of *Dark* magic, fool. Don't just go shoving Light magic into it whenever you please."

"My apologies," Pure Vanilla repeats, folding his hands in his lap with an anxious frown. "I only meant to help."

It – had, a little. The edges of Shadow Milk's headache are gone, the heavy throbbing reduced to a duller twinge. As he massages his temples, he catches Pure Vanilla's frown deepening, eyes clouded with open guilt.

Ugh. It's too early for this.

Shadow Milk sighs again, pushing himself off the table to float back up in the air. He hovers a few inches away, folding his arms behind his back as Pure Vanilla morosely glances up at him. "Calm down," Shadow Milk huffs. "I'm fine. Just *warn* a Cookie before you start putting your paws all over him, hm? Personal space, Nilly."

Even with Shadow Milk purposefully hovering mere centimeters from Pure Vanilla's face, the other doesn't rise to the bait. He still looks downcast, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve. "My apologies," he repeats.

Shadow Milk reaches out, flicking Pure Vanilla on the forehead. "Hey," he says quietly. "Weren't you supposed to be sweet to me today?" He perks an expectant brow. "I'm waiting."

This, finally, is enough to draw a flicker of a smile to Pure Vanilla's face. He raises his head back up, eyes softening as he takes in Shadow Milk's impish grin. His hand lifts, almost instinctively – before suddenly freezing, hovering just above Shadow Milk's cheek. "Oh." His brow furrows, sudden hesitation plain on his face. "Ah, may I-?"

Shadow Milk tilts his head, leaning into the touch as his eyes slip shut. "Stop worrying," he replies easily. "See? It's fine."

There's a quiet hum; Shadow Milk can perfectly picture Pure Vanilla's smile, even with his own eyes shut. The hand on his cheek brushes gently up and through his hair before Pure Vanilla audibly shifts in his seat –

To press another kiss to Shadow Milk's cheek.

Shadow Milk blinks his eyes open in surprise, but Pure Vanilla is already pulling away, leaning back in his chair with a smile. Shadow Milk glances over him before asking: "Does

that mean you're leaving?"

"Not at all. It's also used as a greeting." Pure Vanilla gestures to him. "I would have given you one with our initial good morning, but you weren't exactly... formed."

"I said I had a headache."

"And I said 'poor thing'." Pure Vanilla pushes himself up from his chair, plucking his staff from its back. "But, we should be off. I told Dark Cacao Cookie I'd meet him in the gardens for a morning walk today."

"There's a we?" Shadow Milk twists in the air, folding his arms over his chest. "Am I coming?"

Pure Vanilla glances up to him, smile twitching into something dangerously close to a smirk. "You don't have to," he replies calmly, "but how am I meant to be sweet to you if you aren't beside me?"

Shadow Milk scoffs, forbidding the flush of – amusement that little comment brings as Pure Vanilla turns and begins walking away. It's by following the other's movement that Shadow Milk finally spots something out of the corner of his eye; he sharply snaps his head to the side, eyes narrowing.

The kitchen staff is frozen in place, openly staring at them.

A pulse of magic; Shadow Milk's head twists into the apparition of a giant snake, fangs bared as he hisses dangerously. In an instant the servants spring back into action, all but falling over each other as they clamber back to their posts.

When Pure Vanilla glances back at the sound, Shadow Milk is already himself again; he shoots the other an innocent smile, hands behind his back.

"Well?" he prompts. "Come on. Let's not keep Bitterbrows waiting."

--

The second thing that Shadow Milk figures out is that Pure Vanilla, for all his self-proclaimed attentiveness, can be extremely obtuse.

Not usually, not in most situations – frankly, Shadow Milk feels a twinge of annoyance every time he reflects on the moments Pure Vanilla had seized upon Shadow Milk's hidden presence like a Cake Hound scenting jam. But, when it comes to his comrades, Shadow Milk is starting to think Pure Vanilla's blindness extends far beyond his physical eyesight.

Dark Cacao Cookie is bothered by Shadow Milk's closeness.

A lot.

That fact in itself is delightful; Shadow Milk had initially discarded his hopes of unsettling such a stony-faced Cookie in that way, especially after Pure Vanilla's easy explanations of greetings and farewells. The thought honestly hadn't even crossed his mind while they'd been waiting in the gardens for Dark Cacao Cookie to arrive. Pure Vanilla had been seated on a nearby bench, eyes closed and clearly enjoying the sun on his dough while Shadow Milk-

Well. Admittedly, Shadow Milk had been resting against him.

It's hardly his fault; the sun *had* been pleasant, its warmth incredibly lulling after a night of such poor sleep. Shadow Milk had simply been leaning his back against Pure Vanilla's side, arms tucked against his stomach as he'd dozed. Perfectly innocent. Nothing to draw any alarm.

Yet, to Shadow Milk's surprise, upon opening his eyes to heavy footsteps he'd been greeted with a gaze that had been absolutely *murderous*.

It had been gone in a flash, replaced by something more neutral as Dark Cacao Cookie had huffed a greeting; the noise had roused Pure Vanilla, leaving Shadow Milk to be gently shrugged off as the other rose to greet his friend. They'd exchanged smiles, fond looks and pleasant remarks-

While Shadow Milk had watched with narrowing eyes and a slowly widening grin.

His morning has improved considerably from there.

The next few hours are spent wandering the gardens; Pure Vanilla and Dark Cacao Cookie discuss everything and nothing at all while Shadow Milk floats along after. Talks regarding their old friends, their citizens, the looming war – all things Shadow Milk would think they'd have gotten out of the way last night, but alas, on they chatter. There hasn't been much room for him in the conversation, but he doesn't mind one bit.

The silence on his part lets Shadow Milk think, lets him plan his next moves oh-so carefully.

Shadow Milk is nothing if not a master at playing his cards right, and this game is no exception. He picks his moments with an expert eye, choosing the perfect when and where to strike – all while oh so slowly pushing further and further into the limits of Dark Cacao's patience.

The first touch is perfectly natural; Shadow Milk drifts in close, nudging Pure Vanilla with his shoulder as he innocently queries about a flower they pass. Shadow Milk, of course, knows perfectly well what the little weed is – *lilium pardalinum*, how revolting – but Pure Vanilla is more than happy to divert his attention and ramble on about his precious plant for a bit. Dark Cacao Cookie may shoot Shadow Milk a suspicious gaze, but there's really nothing for him to protest.

The next opportunity presents itself in the form of a wayward root, spread out from a nearby tree and jutting sharply through the path. As Pure Vanilla moves to step around it, Shadow

Milk simply swoops out in front of him; he gently grasps both of Pure Vanilla's hands in his own and effortlessly lifts him up and over, a graceful arc through the air as light as a feather.

Alright, so it had been magic, not his own meager arm strength that had managed it – but still.

Pure Vanilla had laughed, a breathless little giggle that had brought an unbidden smile to Shadow Milk's face. Even better, when he'd glanced to Dark Cacao Cookie, he'd seen the other's mouth twisted into an expression somewhere between disbelief and even deeper suspicion.

Yet again, nothing to rebuke. Shadow Milk is simply being a gentleman, nothing more.

The final push is his most daring, but morning has begun stretching into the afternoon and even with Pure Vanilla's many – *many* – stops to wax poetic about his plants, they've almost reached the end of the path. As the three of them approach the garden's exit Shadow Milk feigns a yawn, stretching his arms high above his head-

Only to loop them oh so casually around Pure Vanilla's shoulders.

The touch does not go unnoticed by either; Dark Cacao's posture stiffens immediately, and even Pure Vanilla's strides begin to slow, a pulse of curiosity singing through their connection.

"Nilly," Shadow Milk drawls, careful to keep his voice light and casual. "I'm still *soooo* sleepy. I'm going back to the castle for a nap, m'kay?"

"Oh? Alright." Pure Vanilla tilts his head slightly, catching a side-eyed glimpse of Shadow Milk's smirking face pressed next to his own. "I was about to head back myself in a bit. Perhaps you'd like to join us again later?"

"Maybe." Shadow Milk lets his eyes flutter shut, nudging Pure Vanilla slightly. "Goodbye, Nilly."

Pure Vanilla, miraculously, seems to get the hint. There's a smile as he lifts a hand, gently turning Shadow Milk by the chin to press a gentle kiss to his cheek. "Goodbye, Shadow Milk Cookie."

When Shadow Milk peeks a glance over, Dark Cacao Cookie looks thunderstruck.

Victory.

Shadow Milk fights back his evil grin, twisting in the air before he sails westward, back towards the castle. He risks a single peek over his shoulder at the two below; Pure Vanilla is watching him go, eyes still ever so fond. Dark Cacao Cookie is –

Well. His expression's a bit hard to read. But it isn't pleased.

Shadow Milk, on the other hand, is over the moon. He feels almost like skipping through the air, replaying the other's discomfited gaze over and over as he twirls and grins to himself.

He's having so much fun, it takes three tries before the shouts finally register in his ears.

"Beast! Hey! Beast!"

Shadow Milk's good mood instantly evaporates; he scowls, craning his neck down to glare at the voice echoing at his feet. He's above the Dark Cacao Kingdom's encampment again, not too far off from the arena itself. Far below, standing at its entrance, lays a Cream Wolf accompanied by a familiar coif of spiky hair framing two bright, golden eyes.

Crunchy Chip Cookie.

A sigh as Shadow Milk descends with his arms folded across his chest. "What? Not allowed in your *airspace* now? I'll have you know I'm on my way home."

"What? No." Crunchy Chip Cookie blinks. "Wait, I mean yes. Maybe. I don't know, that's the king's decision."

Shadow Milk perks an impatient brow.

"What I mean is," Crunchy Chip continues hastily, "can you summon that thing from before? Again?"

"Seriously?" Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "Kid, I don't do repeat performances. Encores maybe, but--"

"Please?" An eager stare pinning him down; Crunchy Chip Cookie practically vibrating with excitement. "It was excellent training! We'll never get an opportunity like this without you around."

Hm. Flattery, if not round-about.

Shadow Milk sighs; he summons his cane to his palm and points it straight at the arena. With a flick of his wrist, a mass of darkness swirls in the center once more – yet this time, no black sludge oozes from the ground. Instead, the darkness elongates and twists in on itself, shuddering as it arches its back with a guttural hiss-

To form a finely-dressed rabbit, balancing perfectly atop a circus ball on its hind legs.

It's about the size of an average Cookie – just like Shadow Milk himself, thank you very much – but its dark eyes gleam with intelligence. It sniffs the air, ears twitching from beneath its top hat as it surveys the arena with idle curiosity.

Crunchy Chip Cookie gapes at it in disbelief; Shadow Milk uses his cane to forcibly turn the other's head back towards him and gives him an unimpressed stare. "Now then," Shadow Milk remarks, "there's a ribbon pinned inside the rabbit's hat. If you get your hands on the ribbon, you will have won. However," Shadow Milk continues, perking a brow, "you will not be able to catch, harm or otherwise impede the rabbit. It is far too quick and clever. Understand?"

“Understand? Hah!” Crunchy Chip Cookie’s eyes gleam; he steps back, striking the air with his weapon. “That pest is no match for a warrior of the Dark Cacao Kingdom! You underestimate me, sir Beast!”

Sir Beast. That’s a new one.

Crunchy Chip Cookie races towards the arena, his Cream Wolf hot on his heels; Shadow Milk merely rolls his eyes, drifting back up into the air as he turns to leave. There’s a few glances back as he rises, watching Crunchy Chip excitedly dive over and over – only to have the rabbit swiftly dodge every time and give him a series of solid kicks for his efforts. The two are still racing in circles by the time Shadow Milk’s crested the clouds; no doubt they’ll still be there long after he leaves.

The eager determination is a bit charming, at least.

But, overenthusiastic soldiers or not, Shadow Milk has a schedule to keep. As he drifts through the air, the castle already well within sight, he cannot help but smile to himself as Pure Vanilla’s balcony slowly filters into focus.

There is a large, plush bed calling Shadow Milk’s name – one he has been parted from far, far too long.

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If Pure Vanilla notices Shadow Milk’s games with Dark Cacao Cookie, he doesn’t comment on them.

Shadow Milk expects it the first day, when he’s temporarily roused from his slumber to find Pure Vanilla slipping in next to him. The sun hasn’t even set yet, low as early evening at best – yet Pure Vanilla is still in his bedclothes, settling in and tucking the sheets back up to Shadow Milk’s chin. When Shadow Milk murmurs a garbled noise of confusion, he’s given a simple: “Your talk of a nap sounded nice. I thought I might join you before dinner tonight.”

Then Pure Vanilla burrows back under the sheets, closing his eyes without another word.

When they both wake again – Shadow Milk begrudgingly – it’s for a dinner in a banquet hall that lasts too long and is far too stuffy for Shadow Milk’s liking. The two Ancients chat while Shadow Milk picks at his food and, on occasion, is prompted into the conversation by Pure Vanilla seeking his opinion on this and that. Queries into the nature of the Dragon Cookies seem to be of the most interest; while Shadow Milk doesn’t particularly care for them himself, Pure Vanilla does seem genuinely curious. Even Dark Cacao Cookie perks up when Shadow Milk begins listing off what he knows, perhaps due to his own connections to the beasts.

Admittedly, Dark Cacao Cookie is much less enthralled by the massive draconic illusions Shadow Milk summons to soar across the ceiling like the night sky, but at least Pure Vanilla Cookie is dazzled.

Then, surprisingly, much of their days begin to pass the same way.

In the morning Shadow Milk and Pure Vanilla wake as usual; the Neapolitan sisters get Pure Vanilla ready while Shadow Milk sneaks in an extra five minutes before they're both being ushered out the door. They share breakfast, usually over a newspaper that Pure Vanilla gets far too distracted by until Shadow Milk prods him to keep eating. Then, more often than not, they're immediately off to see Dark Cacao Cookie yet again.

Unfortunately.

The location changes day to day, but their shared activities rarely do. Dark Cacao and Pure Vanilla tend to pass their time together just talking, or sometimes just sitting in comfortable silence and enjoying the scenery. It's not the most engaging thing to sit through on Shadow Milk's part – or wouldn't be, if he didn't delight in his continued game of seeing how often he can make Dark Cacao Cookie's brow furrow in distrust.

The answer is a lot.

Simple touches are a good way to start; Shadow Milk never goes for the grand gestures off the bat, even if they do garner the most reaction. When they're taking in the views of the Vanilla Kingdom from a high scenic point, Shadow Milk rests his arms and chin atop Pure Vanilla's head. When they're being lectured about Wafflebot machinery by the pipsqueak in the hanger, Shadow Milk tucks himself against Pure Vanilla's back and places his hands on the others hips as he pretends to listen. When they're parting ways for the night, Shadow Milk casually slips in a remark about how warm Pure Vanilla's bed is, even earning him a quick flush from the man himself.

The fourth day of the stay finds the three of them sitting on blanket in the gardens; Dark Cacao Cookie has brought a gift of peach-flavored tea, a surprisingly sweet drink for such a bitterly stoic fellow. There's some remarks about another Cookie in Beast Yeast Dark Cacao'd encountered that Shadow Milk largely tunes out, picking at his sleeves as he chooses his moment. When the pair are distracted, heads lowering to take a sip of their tea, Shadow Milk coyly begins floating downwards on his back. His movements are casual, careful as he slowly lowers himself down to let his head rest against Pure Vanilla's lap. He even gives a big yawn to draw attention from both, eyes fluttering shut to pretend he doesn't see their reactions.

The gentle hand running through his hair tells him Pure Vanilla's well enough; Shadow Milk has a pretty good idea of what Dark Cacao Cookie's will be.

Which is why it's extra surprising that, upon cracking one eye open for a peek, he sees Dark Cacao Cookie frowning back –

Thoughtfully.

His expression lacks the usual ire; it's still full of suspicion to be sure, but there's something newly appraising about the way he's looking Shadow Milk over.

It's a little unnerving; Shadow Milk chooses to shut his eyes and ignore it. If this is a new gambit from Dark Cacao, Shadow Milk isn't budging. There's no valid reason to get up and move again so quickly; doing so would give away the game, even if the weight of the other's look rests uncomfortably on Shadow Milk's dough.

Whatever. The feeling of Pure Vanilla's hand stroking through Shadow Milk's hair is a pleasant enough excuse to continue lying there anyway.

They don't spend every dinner with Dark Cacao Cookie; sometimes it's just the two of them, usually passing the time up in Pure Vanilla's bedroom over idle talk or a game or two. Pure Vanilla's gotten marginally better at chess – he still doesn't hold a candle to Shadow Milk's own prowess, but the devouring of the pieces to make the game end quicker has ceased. For now.

Amusingly, Crunchy Chip Cookie doesn't seem to have improved on his end of things. Each time Shadow Milk's flown past the camp, the rabbit is still there, still dodging and weaving, surrounded by soldiers who are making their fruitless attempts while in hot pursuit. The congregation around the arena seems to grow every time he passes by; Shadow Milk's pretty sure he even saw three of them drawing a battle plan out in the dirt.

Well. They seem to be enjoying the dilemma, at least.

The fifth morning Shadow Milk doesn't leave with Pure Vanilla; Black Raisin Cookie comes and finds him at breakfast instead, asks him to help track down a Cake Monster spotted near the edges. He obliges on a whim, largely to impress – it's a simple enough feat to dispatch the beast with a simple flick of his wrist. He soaks in her amusingly brusque praise, makes her promise to go drinking again as a pair, and then lazily gives her a little nudge – not a throw, a nudge – with his magic before heading back to the castle.

She still swears at him, but it sounds exasperated at best.

Upon returning, he doesn't spy Pure Vanilla in the kitchens – nor in the gardens, nor in his bedroom. Shadow Milk roams their usual spots top to bottom, finding neither hide nor hair of the other; not until he begrudgingly stops to ask – demand – a shaky little servant where on Earthbread Pure Vanilla's gotten to.

Shadow Milk finds that he does not like the answer.

“Why are you still bothering with this?”

Shadow Milk doesn't bother to hide the derision in his voice, a hand on his hips as he stares Pure Vanilla down. The other is knelt, hands clasped together and head bowed – only when Shadow Milk floats closer do his eyes open, head turning with a placid smile. The rays of sun shining through the golden sugar-glass windows dance prettily across his dough, but Shadow Milk is in no mood to appreciate the sight.

He despises this chapel, all chapels dedicated to – Them. He despises the fact Pure Vanilla is standing here more.

“Hello, Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla replies calmly, getting to his feet as he brushes at his robes. “I’d just finished, actually.”

“Finished *what*?” Shadow Milk casts a disgusted gaze across their surroundings. “You know full well what the Witches are. I’m shocked you even still come.”

“Prayer is important to me.” Pure Vanilla laces his hands in front of him, gaze steady. “That has not changed, even knowing what I know.”

“Why?” Shadow Milk demands. “They don’t love you, Pure Vanilla Cookie. They don’t care about you or your friends, or any other Cookie here. You bear the knowledge that has broken so many others, yet still come *here*? Now *that’s* a joke.”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, observing Shadow Milk with annoying placidity. “Prayer is more than just seeking gifts from higher powers. As I said, it’s important to me.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “And as I said – *why*?”

“It gives me time to think.” Pure Vanilla bends down, picking up his staff from where it lay before straightening up again. “Even if not a single one of my prayers is answered, I still gain from the exercise. It allows me to focus, to dig deeper on what I truly wish for. What I must work towards.”

“Pointless,” Shadow Milk retorts hotly. “So self-sacrificing you’ll bend the knee to cruelty itself.”

Pure Vanilla gives him a considering look. “I do not think anyone is incapable of change,” he replies after a moment. “Not even my creators. If my prayers seeking kindness touch their hearts even once, they will not have been in vain.”

Shadow Milk sneers. “Fool. You really know how to disappoint me, Nilly.”

“Let me ask you this.” Pure Vanilla steps forward, the tap of his staff muffled by the dirt. “What do you want, Shadow Milk Cookie?”

“Excuse me?”

Pure Vanilla lifts a hand, brushing it against his brooch. “As I said, prayer is an exercise. The time I spend seeking out my deepest desires helps me realize and accept them. If I could have one wish, what would it be? This too is part of the Truth I am searching for.” Pure Vanilla cocks his head, looking Shadow Milk over. “What about you? If you, Shadow Milk Cookie, could have one wish, could have anything you wanted in this very moment – what would it be?”

Shadow Milk’s mouth opens instinctively, something cold and furious ready to tumble off the tip of his tongue-

Yet the words don't come.

Shadow Milk knows what his answer could be, the first thing that springs to mind. The severance of their bond, the freedom to leave and never return if he so chooses. Yet he also knows such an answer is violence itself; it serves him nothing to say aloud, would only shatter the fragile peace Pure Vanilla has somehow constructed around them. He does want it – doesn't want to be tied, to be held at knifepoint with this fate forced upon him – but it doesn't feel like the right thing to say.

So what *does* he want? The destruction of the Witches? His old body back? To be reunited with the Beasts, to reign over the world with the chaos and deceit he'd so effortlessly woven into the fabric of reality? Had he been happy then?

Is he happier now?

His silence stretches on too long; he's uncertain of the expression on his own face, but Pure Vanilla's is irritatingly sympathetic. "It's alright," Pure Vanilla says quietly. "I don't need an answer right now. I just think it's important to examine our desires from time to time."

This, at least, is something that Shadow Milk can seize upon. He folds his arms, scoffing with an exaggerated eye roll. "I know what I want. To do whatever I please."

"Well," Pure Vanilla replies mildly. "It pleases *me* to pray. But, I know full well what the Witches have done, the cruelty they inflicted upon you. I understand your repulsion."

"Cruelty?" Shadow Milk perks a brow. "That's not how your precious Faerie Cookies would put it. As I'm told, I deserved it."

"It was cruel." Pure Vanilla's gaze is sad and gentle. "And you didn't deserve that. You had been burdened with an unbearable eternity. Even if your actions were not right, even if you needed to be stopped, you deserved to be heard and helped, not locked away forever."

"Hm." Shadow Milk forbids the strange flicker of emotion in his chest, ignores the way his jam warms at the words. "Sounds heretical. I like that." Pure Vanilla chuckles softly as Shadow Milk floats in closer, grin widening ever so slightly. "If that's the case," Shadow Milk continues slyly, "then how about you just pray to *me* instead."

"Oh?" Pure Vanilla perks a brow, eyes glittering with amusement. "What an interesting offer."

"Why not?" Shadow Milk twists in the air around Pure Vanilla, a lazy, drifting circle as he brushes up against the other. "I'm a *much* better listener. I've got all the power to make your wildest dreams come true."

"Do you now?" Pure Vanilla reaches out, catching Shadow Milk by the ruff of his collar; he pulls Shadow Milk closer, eyes lidding slightly. "And what kind of god will you be, Shadow Milk Cookie?"

“Mischievous.” Shadow Milk grins sharply, eyes roaming daringly over Pure Vanilla’s face. “Impulsive.”

“Caring?” Pure Vanilla’s smile turns sly. “Will you care for me?”

“Maybe.” Shadow Milk finds his hands moving without thought, coming to rest on Pure Vanilla’s hips. “If you please me.”

Pure Vanilla hums, tilting his head. “Have we not already lived that life?”

“Fine.” Shadow Milk squeezes the other’s hips, drawing him closer. “Even when you don’t. Especially when you don’t. I’ll spoil you rotten, far better than those wretched Witches ever could.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes flutter as he brushes their foreheads together. “How tempting,” he murmurs softly, “Then, tell me – how shall I *worship* you, Shadow Milk Cookie?”

Shadow Milk’s mouth snaps open, the flush on his face growing hot as a gleeful retort sings in his throat-

Before the harsh sound of a throat being cleared abruptly shatters the scene.

The pair turns their heads sharply towards the noise; Dark Cacao Cookie stands in the doorway, visibly uncomfortable. His hand rests on his sword, his eyes slowly averting as he says: “Pure Vanilla Cookie. The servants told me to find you here.”

“Oh! Dark Cacao Cookie, good morning!” Pure Vanilla swiftly disentangles himself from Shadow Milk’s grasp, hurrying over with his face still brightly flushed. “How are you, my friend?”

“I am well,” Dark Cacao Cookie says stiffly. “I came to inform you that my men and I will be departing tomorrow.”

“So soon?” Pure Vanilla queries; Shadow Milk has to bite back a laugh at how out-of-breath the other sounds. “Oh, that’s a shame.”

Dark Cacao Cookie gives Pure Vanilla a slow once-over, unamused gaze flicking briefly to Shadow Milk before lowering back down. “I must return to my kingdom. I have seen enough to be...” He grimaces. “Understanding of your situation.”

Pure Vanilla cocks his head. “What do you mean?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, clearing his own throat before announcing loudly: “I’ll give you two some space. Dark Cacao Cookie, always a pleasure. To hear you’re leaving.” Shadow Milk then turns on his heels, already half-slipped into darkness before a sudden:

“Wait.”

A strange silence reigns; Shadow Milk slowly turns his head, looking back at Dark Cacao Cookie with a curious perk to his brow. “Yes?”

Dark Cacao Cookie weighs him down with a heavy stare, openly appraising him with a series of sweeping glances. Even Pure Vanilla Cookie looks a bit uneasy, shifting on his feet before Dark Cacao Cookie suddenly remarks:

“The rabbit.”

Shadow Milk blinks. “What?”

“The rabbit,” Dark Cacao Cookie repeats, an edge of fatigue to his voice now. “My soldiers have been battling it for days. Dismiss it, or they will leave unsatisfied.”

Another beat of silence before Shadow Milk snorts, rolling his eyes before grinning down at the man. “Oh, sheesh. They’re really still at it, huh?”

Dark Cacao Cookie says nothing, gaze tired.

Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder. “Just tell them to ask for it.”

A furrow to Dark Cacao’s brows. “What?”

“Ask for it.” Shadow Milk waves a dismissive hand. “Ask for the ribbon. I told them very plainly at the start they wouldn’t be able to land a scratch on my summon. All they have to do is politely ask for their prize, and the rabbit will give it to them.”

Dark Cacao stares back at him, frown deepening. “A trick.”

“Hardly.” Shadow Milk lets his eyes drift down to Pure Vanilla. “This one’s always prattling on about solving violence through conversation. Call it an homage.”

Pure Vanilla’s uneasy expression immediately shifts to one of delight; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes again, averting his gaze with an admittedly fond huff.

Dark Cacao Cookie looks decidedly less impressed. “You cannot *politely ask* your way out of a battle.”

“How would you know?” Shadow Milk counters. “Have you ever tried it?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer; with a swift burst of darkness, Shadow Milk disappears from sight. He does, however, enjoy glancing back to peruse the lingering look of fatigue on Dark Cacao’s face; Shadow Milk allows himself one final giggle before slipping away through the shadows back into the walls.

Perhaps he had enjoyed this visit after all.

Of all the many, many virtues Shadow Milk holds, patience is not one of them.

He has, in his opinion, been very forgiving today. He's left Pure Vanilla and Dark Cacao Cookie alone, occupied himself with idle amusements throughout the day to give them their last, uninterrupted vestiges of time together. He's refrained from tormenting the servants, eaten three square meals, and rested comfortably and quietly while waiting for Pure Vanilla to return. Even when the door had swung open and Pure Vanilla had greeted with a smile, Shadow Milk had not rebuffed the man's request for a few moments to complete some paperwork before bed.

Which is why it is very, very annoying that two hours have passed with Pure Vanilla still sat at that infuriatingly packed desk.

Shadow Milk's patience is exhausted; he's been sitting pretty on the bed, waiting with barely more than a few words spoken – yet still, Pure Vanilla is scribbling away, oblivious to all else in the room. Shadow Milk had even dozed off a few times from sheer boredom, only to groggily reawaken to the sound of a quill scratching over paper.

Honestly. Shadow Milk had expected a night of celebration, of *something* after the chapel. It's been days since they've connected, the itch beneath his dough growing more and more unpleasant the longer he scowls at Pure Vanilla's back. The other is dreadfully oblivious to Shadow Milk's discontent, even letting out a piercing yawn that perks Shadow Milk's interest – before going right back to scribbling away.

Right. That's it.

Shadow Milk points his cane directly at the other; Pure Vanilla's chair is pulled sharply backwards as he lets out a startled noise. Shadow Milk bends his wrist, yanking the other through the air as Pure Vanilla squeaks in alarm; it's not until Pure Vanilla is held floating in place, arms flailing unsteadily at his sides that Shadow Milk sits up properly and folds his arms across his chest.

"I told you," he says coldly, "it's dangerous to ignore me."

Pure Vanilla's surprised expression morphs to one of sincere apology, even as a small smile graces his lips. "Oh dear. Did I go long again?"

"Yes." Shadow Milk points at the bedspread; Pure Vanilla is tossed upon it, pushing a small *umph* from the other's lips. "Knock it off. There's nothing more important in those papers than me."

Pure Vanilla hums, pushing himself up on his elbows. "Very true. Are you feeling neglected again?"

"Shut up." Shadow Milk plants a hand on Pure Vanilla's chest, pushing him down again. He leans over the other, sweeping a disapproving gaze over Pure Vanilla's soft smile before clicking his tongue. "Well?"

Pure Vanilla lets his head roll to the right, perking a brow. "Well, what?"

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Are you in the mood, or what?”

“Hm? Oh!” Pure Vanilla’s eyes spark with recognition. “To connect. Yes,” he continues, smile deepening. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

A hum as Shadow Milk leans in closer; Pure Vanilla’s hands come up to gently cup his face, rubbing small circles on Shadow Milk’s cheeks. A soft exhale as Shadow Milk lets his eyes slip shut, inhaling the soft scent of vanilla and-

Wait.

Shadow Milk’s eyes snap open; he sniffs the air, brow furrowing.

Pure Vanilla blinks up at him. “What’s wrong?”

“What is that?” Shadow Milk turns his head this way and that, sniffing as his brow furrows. He grabs Pure Vanilla’s hands, bringing them to his face – there. The smell is coming from there.

What is that? It’s not unpleasant per se, but the half-memory of the scent itches badly in the back of Shadow Milk’s brain. Where has he smelled this before?

It’s not lilies. He *knows* lilies.

Pure Vanilla giggles. “What are you *doing*?”

“What do you have on your hands?” Shadow Milk demands, sniffing them again. “I know this smell.”

“Nothing?” Pure Vanilla gives him an odd look. “They’re clean, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s not.” Shadow Milk turns his head towards the desk, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Were you writing with something new?”

“No?” Pure Vanilla shrugs one shoulder. “Only ink. Well, on the odd occasion a letter I receive is perfumed, but-”

Shadow Milk is off Pure Vanilla in an instant, zipping over to the desk with his cane in hand. He flicks the papers up, sending them into a dizzying spiral overhead as his sharp eyes scan each piece flitting by.

“Haven’t you learned not to go through my letters?” Pure Vanilla calls from the bed; Shadow Milk ignores him.

After a moment or two, the smell hits him again – Shadow Milk’s hand snaps out, grasping an olive-green envelope from the stack. The papers immediately drop to the floor as he examines his prize, even as Pure Vanilla lets out a tired sigh from behind.

“Those were organized, you know.”

Shadow Milk turns the envelope over in his hands; it's been opened, but the contents have been slipped back inside. It's addressed to Pure Vanilla Cookie but there's only a return address printed on the top left – no hint of a name to be found. Shadow Milk turns, holding the envelope aloft towards Pure Vanilla. "Who sent this?"

Pure Vanilla gives him a very, very dry look.

Right. Too far.

Shadow Milk floats back over, slipping next to Pure Vanilla on the bed as he thrusts the envelope into the others hands. "Who sent this?" he repeats.

Pure Vanilla picks it up, turning the envelope over before letting out a short sigh. "Ah, yes. Juniper Berry Cookie's invitation."

Juniper. That's what he'd smelled.

"Another one of her invitations to her balls; she's very persistent, I'll give her that. No doubt she'd heard the Dark Cacao Kingdom was present. Unfortunately, they'll be long gone by tomorrow." Pure Vanilla shrugs one shoulder, offering the envelope back to Shadow Milk. "I hadn't planned on attending. Why the sudden interest?"

Shadow Milk grins sharply, all teeth. "Because we're going."

"We are?" Pure Vanilla blinks. "Wait, we?"

A laugh as Shadow Milk reaches forward, grasping Pure Vanilla's chin in his hand. "Oh yes." His eyes lid, mischief gleaming wickedly in their depths. "I've spent all week playing along with your friend, Pure Vanilla Cookie." Shadow Milk leans in close, grin widening.

"So now, we're going to play *my* game."

Chapter 17

The farewell to the Dark Cacao Kingdom troops takes entirely too long.

The airship docks are bustling with activity the entire time; soldiers hurry back and forth, loading cargo and barking orders. It is, upon reflection, rather impressive that Dark Cacao Cookie had managed to summon such an army up here in the first place; there's been multiple balloon trips back and forth already to take them to their ships by the port, and there's still another contingent to go.

Not that any of this waiting seems to have any effect on Dark Cacao Cookie himself. He and Pure Vanilla Cookie are tucked off to the side, shaded beneath a small canopy tent as they talk. Dark Cacao Cookie's gaze is remarkably calm, yet still tinged with worry; Pure Vanilla's hand on his arm is comforting, his smile gentled and reassuring. They've been talking for over an hour now in hushed voices that are meant for their ears alone.

Shadow Milk, meanwhile, has been bouncing his leg irritably the entire time. He's reclined in the air a few feet away, arms folded across his chest as he impatiently glances at the docks, then to the pair with increasing agitation. A ringing laugh from Pure Vanilla, a fond sigh from Dark Cacao Cookie – he *gets* it, they're *friends*, they'll *miss* each other.

Get over it.

There's a sharp whistle; another set of soldiers are loading into the ship, getting ready for descent. It seems to be the final one, based on the way Dark Cacao Cookie lifts his head towards the sound. He motions to Pure Vanilla with a wave of his massive hand; the two of them step out into the sunlight with Dark Cacao briefly shielding his eyes from the glare. He then turns, nodding briefly to a saluting captain before returning his attention to Pure Vanilla.

"I must return to my kingdom," he says quietly, eyes roaming over Pure Vanilla's form. "I will miss you, my friend."

"And I will miss you." Pure Vanilla's smile is kind and gentle, his hand still resting upon Dark Cacao's arm. "We must make time for one another more often."

Dark Cacao grunts; he glances briefly up at Shadow Milk. "If anything goes... amiss--"

"I know." Pure Vanilla pats gently, smile unfaltering. "You have always stood at my side when I needed you."

"You have only to call." Dark Cacao offers a small smile of his own; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, sticking out his tongue in disgust.

Gross.

A few more nauseatingly fond farewells, the last of the soldiers piling in and finally, finally, *finally* the airship descends; there are no words to the amount of relief felt at the image of

Dark Cacao's overbearingly stoic face slowly disappearing from sight.

Shadow Milk allows Pure Vanilla thirty seconds of watching and waving to the ship's silhouette slipping across the horizon; once the timer is up, he zips over and grabs Pure Vanilla's arm with both hands.

"Right," he says impatiently. "That's enough of that." With a pulse of magic and a firm yank he hoists Pure Vanilla into the air; he gets a startled squeak for his efforts. There's no time to waste as he pulls the other behind him, watching Pure Vanilla flail and protest with the wind whipping at their faces as Shadow Milk soars upwards towards the clouds.

The castle looms bright in the distance; Shadow Milk picks up speed as Pure Vanilla yelps faintly behind him. No matter.

Shadow Milk Cookie has a meeting to keep.

--

Shadow Milk's hands are placed solidly on his hips, his back straight and his gaze firm.

Three identical pairs of eyes stare back; one set narrowed, another curious – and, quite frankly, the last looks like she might be dozing off.

No matter. The Neapolitan sisters are to be trusted; Pure Vanilla has made that perfectly clear.

"Fresa," Shadow Milk says calmly, eyeing the small Cookie up and down.

"Lord Shadow Milk Cookie." The title is strange on her lips, her expression steady but distinctly cold at the same time. Fresa is perfectly poised, not a hair out of place with her sisters positioned daintily on either side. Choca is giving Shadow Milk a curious once-over; Nilla looks pleasantly dazed as she smiles back at him.

"I don't like you," Shadow Milk Cookie says bluntly, "and you don't like me."

"I like you," Nilla interjects cheerily.

"Regardless," Shadow Milk continues, "you are Pure Vanilla Cookie's most dedicated staff. You understand how to deal with him best. So, I have come to you."

Fresa's expression is unchanged, but there is a slight, curious lift to her brow. "And what have you come to me for, Lord Shadow Milk Cookie?"

"This." Shadow Milk Cookie points directly at Pure Vanilla; the other is sat on the edge of his bed, hands folded in his lap. There's a distinctly amused smile on his face; he even raises a hand to wave back. Shadow Milk ignores it, snapping his attention back to Fresa. "I need *this* to look spectacular. And I need it by tomorrow night."

Fresa cocks her head, fluttering her lashes. “Master Pure Vanilla Cookie always looks spectacular,” she says neutrally.

“Don’t be coy.” Shadow Milk’s hands return to his hips. “He’s going to a ball, and he needs to look better than he’s ever been. Spotless, not a hair out of place. Absolute perfection, and a new outfit to match.”

“Is this about what I said earlier?” Pure Vanilla asks mildly. “Why can’t I just wear my usual robes? No one’s ever complained.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “You see what I’m working with here?”

“I do.” Fresa’s judgmental stare has shifted, looking over Pure Vanilla appraisingly as she folds her hands before her. “It won’t be easy. He can be very stubborn about this sort of thing.”

“Leave that part to me.” Shadow Milk leans over, eyes serious. “Can you do it?”

Fresa’s expression sharpens, distinctly thoughtful. “There is a tailor in town that makes the finest suits, but he is fully commissioned for the next few months.”

Shadow Milk flicks his wrist, summoning a hefty pouch of coins in the air. He drops it into her open palm as Nilla and Choca peer in excitedly. “He’ll work overnight. Take something finished and stylize it if he must, but there better not be a single stray thread sticking out or I’ll burn his shop to the ground. Tell him that exactly.”

“Do not,” Pure Vanilla pipes in from the bed.

Shadow Milk raises his brow, holding Fresa’s gaze. He means it.

Fresa passes the purse to Choca before glancing back up. “How do you want his hair?”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk cranes his neck back, considering. “Don’t cut it,” he decides. “Tie it back into something formal.”

“Chignon bun?” Fresa asks. “Half-up? Waterfall braid?”

“Dealer’s choice,” Shadow Milk replies dismissively. “Whatever he won’t ruin by moving about. He has to dance with it.”

Fresa hums. “We’ll need him the rest of the day to be fitted, and tomorrow as well.”

“Take him. I won’t need him until tomorrow.” Shadow Milk thinks for a moment, then adds: “If he’s up to my standards, I’ll give you double whatever’s in that purse.”

Fresa gives him one last look-over before she finally dips down, bending into a low curtsy. “As you wish, Lord Shadow Milk Cookie.” She then straightens, motioning to her sisters. “Come. Let’s get the carriage ready. We’ll need to move quickly.”

The three sweep from the room; Shadow Milk instantly pivots on his heels, directing a pointed look Pure Vanilla's way. "Any objections?" he asks, in a tone that distinctly forbids them.

"I'm very afraid of you right now," Pure Vanilla replies mildly.

"Good." Shadow Milk floats closer, leaning in as he prods Pure Vanilla in the chest. "Go with them. No complaining, no objections to the cost or time or anything else. I have less than forty-eight hours. Don't slow me down."

Pure Vanilla's eyes glitter with amusement; he lifts a hand, gently taking Shadow Milk's into his own. "Yes, dear."

"Don't be cute."

"Why is this so important?" Pure Vanilla queries, tilting his head. "I'll admit, I'm still quite puzzled by your interest."

"I told you," Shadow Milk replies, baring his teeth in a grin. "We're playing a game. In case you're forgotten, *I* am a showman, my dear foolish Nilly. I will accept nothing less than an utterly dazzled audience. Since you're going to be playing the role of my assistant, you must be dazzling too."

Pure Vanilla's eyes lid fondly; he raises Shadow Milk's clasped hand, pressing a chaste kiss to its wrist as he murmurs: "But you are already dazzling. Will you not simply outshine me?"

"Of course I will." Shadow Milk removes his hand from the other's grasp, giving Pure Vanilla a flick on the forehead. "But, you need to look presentable on my arm. So, no more stalling." Shadow Milk floats backwards, pointing at the door. "Go get in your carriage. I'm going to be plenty busy without you."

A small smile as Pure Vanilla pushes himself up from the bed. "Very well," he sighs. "Though, I still think my robes--"

Shadow Milk sweeps his cane out, instantly hurling Pure Vanilla through the door before slamming it shut behind him.

Right. Enough of that.

Shadow Milk has work to do.

--

The rest of the day is spent deep in research.

Shadow Milk may no longer be a scholar by profession, but that doesn't mean he's any less proficient in the art. He summons all available articles from the library on historical fashion, period dress, even hairstyles throughout the decades and pours over them with precise, searching eyes. Once he's finished he tosses them aside to zip through the servant's quarters; he darts from room to room as he collects magazines and photo frames, swiftly memorizing them in perfect detail before discarding them to the floor. He even takes the time to trawl the markets in the shadows, studying the ladies that walk along the streets with an appraising squint.

Analyzing. Compiling his data.

He has to get this perfect.

When evening comes, Shadow Milk's up in Pure Vanilla's bedroom, laying on his stomach as he pours through the latest Cookieopolitan. When the lock on the room audibly turns he glances up; the door swings open to reveal Pure Vanilla himself, arms laden with shopping bags and dutifully flanked by the three sisters.

He looks exhausted.

Shadow Milk lifts himself up, glancing at Fresa as she dips into another curtsy and swiftly exits with her sisters. Pure Vanilla simply groans, dragging himself in and collapsing into the closest chair. The bags drop sloppily from his arms going limp; Shadow Milk quickly flicks his cane, catching their contents to place them gently on the ground. "My," he comments idly, watching Pure Vanilla exhale audibly. "Long day?"

Pure Vanilla groans, lifting his hands to rub at his eyes. "What have you gotten me into?"

"High society." Shadow Milk pushes off the bed, floating closer to the other with an impish grin. "Oh please, Nilly. It was just trying on clothes! It can't have been that bad, you big drama queen."

"Trying on clothes is exhausting," Pure Vanilla sighs wearily. "You do it sometime."

"Don't have to. *AlIIIll* magic, all the time, Dollface!" Shadow Milk does a little twirl in the air for effect before planting a hand on his hip. "So, what's in the bags? Suit already done?"

Pure Vanilla waves a hand vaguely towards the floor. "Not yet. Tomorrow. And, I don't know. They picked out..." He grimaces. "It's all a blur. They just kept pulling me from place to place. You've thoroughly turned my staff against me."

"Good." Shadow Milk stuffs his hand into the nearest bag, pulling out the contents one by one. "Face cream... leave-in conditioner... hm! Seems Fresa knows her stuff."

Another groan as Pure Vanilla slumps deeper into the chair. "I don't know what those are."

"Well, I do. And you're applying it tonight." Shadow Milk flicks his wrist, floating the bags over to the bed as he beckons impatiently to Pure Vanilla. "Come on. Up. Let's start putting it on."

Pure Vanilla cracks open a weary eye; he looks remarkably pathetic in a way that is more than a little pleasing to Shadow Milk's eye. "A moment's rest. I beg of you."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "Up," he demands again. "All you have to do is sit on the bed. I'll do the rest, you big baby."

A heavy sigh and something that sounds suspiciously like a whine before Pure Vanilla is heaving himself up out of the chair, dragging himself over to the bed and flopping over on his back. Shadow Milk snorts, prodding the other on the cheek; Pure Vanilla exhales loudly, turning his face away.

"So dramatic," Shadow Milk drawls. "And that's coming from me." He scoots closer, popping open the lotion's top as he pats Pure Vanilla's chest. "Face forward. You have to let this one sit evenly."

Pure Vanilla obliges, eyes lidded as he gives Shadow Milk a weary once-over. "I wonder," he murmurs, "is this some new attempt of yours to break my spirit? It's very effective."

Shadow Milk barks a laugh, squirting a small dollop of lotion onto Pure Vanilla's face; the other wrinkles his brow at the sensation. "Oh?" he teases, reaching over to smooth the cream up and over. "You're saying instead of toying with your memories, I should have just made you go clothes shopping instead?"

"It would have been an option," Pure Vanilla sighs. "I think I would have given up quicker."

A scoff as Shadow Milk smirks to himself. "I'll keep that in mind for my inevitable takeover."

"Ah, yes." Pure Vanilla's eyes close as Shadow Milk dabs the lotion on his brows. "And what might that takeover entail?"

"First," Shadow Milk replies, "I'll make this castle mine."

"Will you now?"

"Yes." Shadow Milk reaches for the lotion again, squirting more into his palm. "I'll decorate it to my liking. Place my banners everywhere, scare off your servants."

"Oh dear," Pure Vanilla hums back. "That sounds like it would cause problems."

"Next," Shadow Milk continues, dabbing at Pure Vanilla's cheeks, "I'll start showing up to your meetings. Listen in on all your secrets and terrorize the delegates whenever they prattle on too much."

"They are known to prattle from time to time."

"Then..." Shadow Milk cocks his head, squinting as he looks Pure Vanilla over. A little more on the chin, maybe. "I'll take over your bedroom. Make it mine too."

"Oh, will you now?" Pure Vanilla replies smoothly. "And why would you do that?"

“Because it’s better than mine,” Shadow Milk retorts. “Honestly. Keeping the plushest, warmest bed all to yourself? What an inconsiderate host!”

“My deepest apologies,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back. “Continue.”

“Finally…” Shadow Milk snaps the cap of the lotion back on, brushing his hands off on the bag. “I’ll trick you into doing things you don’t want. Like clothes shopping, and going to fancy balls hosted by persistent admirers.”

A soft sigh as Pure Vanilla’s eyes flutter open, gaze fond as he looks Shadow Milk over. “I see,” he says softly. “Perhaps the legends about you are true. Does your cruelty know no bounds?”

“Nope,” Shadow Milk replies, popping the *p* for effect. “Now sit still. That needs to set for twenty minutes.”

Pure Vanilla lifts a hand, gently trailing it in a curve around Shadow Milk’s brooch. “Speaking of things I want,” he murmurs, voice soft and alluring. “Perhaps later, we could-?”

“No way.” Shadow Milk swats his hand away. “You’ll get all slumpy and smear your face in the sheets. And I need to be sharp for tomorrow.”

A flicker of surprise crosses Pure Vanilla’s face before his brow furrows slightly. “But…”

Shadow Milk shakes his head. “No buts. You want me?” He flicks Pure Vanilla’s forehead. “Good. Use it. Just wait until tomorrow.” He then leans over, grasping around in the bag before pulling out the conditioner bottle. “Now sit up. This is for your hair.”

Pure Vanilla gives him a tired once-over, even as a tiny smile twitches at his lips. “Cruel. Heartless.”

“And devilishly handsome.” Shadow Milk gives him another prod to his side. “Now sit up. You can rest after.”

“Promise?” Pure Vanilla sighs.

“Of course.” Shadow Milk leans in close, brushing a hand through Pure Vanilla’s hair as he grins. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

--

Shadow Milk may have judged the Neapolitan sisters too harshly from their first encounter; the three are definitely beginning to grow on him.

The next morning, before Shadow Milk can even fully open his eyes – certainly before Pure Vanilla can – the other is being pulled out the door by six impatient, tiny hands who’ve

already got him dressed and upright before he himself seems to realize. There's some sort of garbled noise of protest swiftly drowned out by the door slamming behind him; with a feeble yawn, Shadow Milk pushes himself up in the bed and arches his back like a cat.

Hm. Better get started; no time like the present.

After a quick breakfast, the rest of the day is spent modeling in front of the mirror, mentally ticking through all the different styles he'd picked up over the last twenty-four hours. Lady Milk Crown Cookie fits him like a glove; the dresses, less so. He poses in an A-line for a bit, swishing it this way and that – no. Too wide. Doesn't flatter her hips. The mermaid style is too tight and narrow, restricting his movements; he can hardly dance like this. The Trumpet's a bit wider, but still doesn't look quite right with the line at his knees. The Tea-Length feels too short, the Sheath too plain.

There's always the classic ball gown, but *everyone* will be wearing one. Lady Milk Crown Cookie can hardly stand out like that.

It isn't until he tries a slip style that things begin to click into place. He tests the length, raising and lowering the slit experimentally; he has the legs for it, sure, but it can't flash too high when dancing. Lady Milk Crown Cookie has a reputation to keep after all.

Eventually he settles on a higher cut, tracing his hands over the fabric as brilliant shades of cerulean and darker blues spread from his touch. When he's done, there's a pleasant gradient of blacks turning blue that slowly rise to the top, speckled with whites and gold that paint a canvas of starlight in a beautiful arc up his form. A brush to the straps; they shift from simple blue fabric to thin, intricately woven silver that gleams in the morning light.

A good start, all things considered.

Shadow Milk continues examining himself, adding little touches here and there; he leaves his legs bare to show off the slit, but adds a pair of almond-toe pumps with silver-backed heels that will still allow him to dance. He slips on long gloves, glossy white with a magnificent sheen that all but glows in the light. After a moment of consideration, he sweeps out his arms to conjure two long, flowing trains of translucent fabric, letting the pair drape from the deep v-cut at his back.

The hair is simple; white and curled into a high twisted bun, with two wavy strands perfectly framing his face. Elegant and regal, especially when he can be sure not a single strand will fall out of place.

Jewelry and makeup come easy; dark lips, black eyeshadow on one eye and a sparkly silver to match the other. He fiddles a bit on the necklace; the cut's low enough to need it, but nothing really seems to meet his vision. Finally, he settles on a large pearl festoon to help accentuate the white of his hair and gloves, and to help draw attention down to-

Well.

The evening is fast approaching, the sun already beginning to dip as Shadow Milk turns and angles himself in front of the mirror. Lady Milk Crown Cookie looks beautiful, sure, stunning

even – but is she beautiful enough? Will this have the effect he wants?

The lock to the bedroom turns; Shadow Milk glances over, hands behind his head in a delicate pose as the door swings open. Pure Vanilla steps in, eyes half-shut as he sighs: “Shadow Milk-”

He doesn’t get farther than that. Pure Vanilla’s eyes snap open, wide as Shadow Milk’s ever seen them. He looks like he’s been struck across the face, his expression absolutely stunned. His mouth drops agape before he quickly snaps it shut. Even his staff, clenched tight in his hand, raises ever so slightly, as if he’s trying to peer closer.

Shadow Milk smirks, arms dropping as he juts out his hips and places one hand firmly upon them. Hm. Not a bad reaction.

Pure Vanilla doesn’t look half-bad himself. His suit – he’s *actually* been wrangled into a suit – is a crisp white, accentuated with an intricate pattern of golden vines cascading down the inner edges of his jacket, matching a twin pattern at the cuffs of his sleeves. His shirt is ruffled, tucked in tight by a cummerbund decorated with equally golden roses; at his neck his Soul Jam lies clasped in the center of a silken neckerchief, tied into a perfect bow. The two golden clasps of his jacket, seated on each side of his hips, are large and ornate, encrusted with diamonds that glitter as Shadow Milk looks them over.

With a glimmer of amusement, Shadow Milk notices the Pure Vanilla’s hair has been woven into a long, single braid; it’s decorated with two blue and yellow flowers tucked just above his bangs, perfectly highlighting his eyes.

The Neapolitan sisters really have outdone themselves.

More amusingly, Pure Vanilla is still openly staring without a flicker of shame. Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, summoning his fan to his palm before pointing it in Pure Vanilla’s direction. “You done?”

Pure Vanilla starts, abruptly straightening up as he blinks rapidly. “I-” There’s a heady flush to his cheeks that Shadow Milk’s eyes trace hungrily. “My apologies. I did not mean to stare.”

“You’re still staring,” Shadow Milk replies easily, snapping his fan open with a sly smile. “But I take it you’re enjoying the view?”

“You’re beautiful.” The words sound like they’ve been rushed out of Pure Vanilla’s mouth; he takes a step forward as if unconsciously, expression still largely dazed.

“I’m always beautiful.” Shadow Milk looks him over, hiding his own deepening smile with his fan. “But, you’re not too bad yourself. How long did that hair take you?”

Pure Vanilla’s already crossing the room as if in a trance; he sets his staff against the chair before reaching out with both hands for Shadow Milk’s own. Amusement still tingling in his jam, Shadow Milk obliges, allowing his palms to rest delicately atop Pure Vanilla’s as he

eyes the other over. Pure Vanilla looks absolutely hypnotized, eyes hazy as he opens his mouth – then closes it, as if he'd forgotten what he was going to say.

Shadow Milk smirks, perking a brow. “The feminine form doing it for you, Nilly?”

There's a blink; as if Shadow Milk had suddenly snapped his fingers, the spell is broken. Pure Vanilla's gaze sharpens, a small frown on his lips. “No, I-” His hands tighten, grasping on Shadow Milk's own. “You're beautiful, yes, but it's not... it's just different. My apologies, I did not mean-”

“Calm down,” Shadow Milk says lazily.

“Apologies,” Pure Vanilla repeats, voice far too serious. “I simply did not expect this. But...” A gentle squeeze to Shadow Milk's hands. “You do not have to accompany me as a woman, Shadow Milk Cookie. Please do not think you have to be anything more than yourself to-”

Shadow Milk slips a hand from Pure Vanilla's grasp, lifting it up and pressing it against the other's lips. “Shhhh,” he hushes, smirk deepening.

Pure Vanilla sighs, tilting his head out from under Shadow Milk's hand. “I just... I don't want you to think this is what I desire more than you, as you are.”

“Aw,” Shadow Milk drawls. “How sweet.” He tilts his fan up, placing it under Pure Vanilla's chin as he traces a gentle line down the other's throat; the visible shudder that follows tickles delightfully in Shadow Milk's jam. “It's cute,” Shadow Milk continues softly, “how you think tonight is about you.”

The fan slips out, rising to firmly tap Pure Vanilla on the forehead. “I told you,” Shadow Milk murmurs, “we're playing a game. So don't go getting your nice new suit all guilt-sweaty over nothing.”

“Apologies,” Pure Vanilla repeats, shoulders slowly untensing as his eyes soften. “But still, if you'd like-”

“I am already doing exactly as I like.” Shadow Milk points to the door. “Now, come on. We need a carriage and a grand entrance, and neither of those things are happening in here. It won't do to keep Lady Milk Crown Cookie waiting.”

“Lady Milk Crown Cookie?” Pure Vanilla repeats curiously. “Who is that?”

Shadow Milk grins ear to ear, leaning up on tiptoe to whisper:

“Your betrothed.”

Chapter 18

“You’re going to cause an international incident.”

The rumbling of the carriage does little to drown out Pure Vanilla’s sighs; each heavy clank of the wheels over the cobblestones jostles the seats, drawing a huff of exasperation from Shadow Milk’s own chest. He’s busy lifting his pocket mirror up, examining himself in the light as best he can. It’s a more difficult task than it should be; the single ceiling lamp makes for a poor frame of reference and the vibrations are jittering the mirror in his palm. Shadow Milk puckers his mouth, turning this way and that as he inspects himself with narrowed eyes.

Had this really been the right lipstick choice?

“Shadow Milk Cookie.”

A patient, exasperated voice; Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, snapping his mirror shut. “*What?*”

Pure Vanilla gives him an amused once-over. “I know I agreed to your games-”

“Then stop complaining,” Shadow Milk retorts back, adjusting the pearls on his neck. Ugh. They keep tilting off-center.

“But,” Pure Vanilla presses, “I cannot simply be *engaged* on a moment’s whim.”

“Of course you can,” Shadow Milk replies easily, waving a hand dismissively. “You can do whatever you want. I do.”

“Shadow Milk...” Pure Vanilla sighs again.

“What?” Shadow Milk folds his legs, one atop the other; the slit in his dress falls dangerously open, and it is with no small amount of amusement that Shadow Milk watches Pure Vanilla’s eyes quickly avert. “Well?”

A shake of his head as Pure Vanilla glances back to him, eyes tired yet fond. “I fear you will force me to say it.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Say *what?*”

A pause as Pure Vanilla looks him over, a small smile gracing his lips. “This is a bad lie.”

Instantly Shadow Milk’s hand flies to his chest, a scoff of affront. “How *dare* you.”

“It is,” Pure Vanilla replies, smile unflinching. “I am sorry, but this simply isn’t something I would do. Abdicated or not, I still have fragile political alliances to maintain and an impromptu engagement would shatter them. Not to mention my friends would take great offense to being left out, there’d be immediate tension with the Crème Republic due to my lineage and history, *no one* has heard of-”

“Alright, I get it,” Shadow Milk snaps; he flicks a hand, his magic shoving Pure Vanilla back into the seats with an audible *umph*. “Fine. We’re not engaged.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes glimmer with amusement as he straightens back up, folding his hands in his lap. “I am sorry,” he chuckles. “I did not mean to offend. I simply did not want the night to be about hurt feelings instead of everyone focusing on how beautiful you are.”

“They’ll focus on that either way.” Shadow Milk leans forward, eyes narrowed as he searches Pure Vanilla appraisingly. “Then, we’ll compromise.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla hums.

Shadow Milk summons his fan with a graceful arc of his wrist, fluttering it before his face. “You’re pursuing me,” he decides, “but I haven’t said yes.”

“I see.” Pure Vanilla leans in as well, smile deepening. “And why haven’t you, I wonder?”

“I’m a difficult catch.” Shadow Milk’s gaze drifts as he weaves the story together in his mind. “You were enraptured by me at first sight, but it wasn’t mutual. I’m entertained by you, but have far too many eligible suitors to settle down with you so easily. You’ve proposed... twice.”

“Twice?”

“Twice,” Shadow Milk repeats thoughtfully. “I’ve said no every time.”

“My,” Pure Vanilla drawls, “you’ve thought this through.”

Shadow Milk snaps his fan closed, flicking it over to rest under Pure Vanilla’s chin. “You’re madly in love with me,” he decides, “so you better act like it.”

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, allowing the fan to graze at his throat. “Very well,” he murmurs lowly, eyes darkening briefly. “I’ll do my best to be... what were the words you used?” A smile, far too sly for Shadow Milk’s liking. “Besotted. Absolutely smitten.”

“Good.” Shadow Milk retracts the fan, placing it back down in his lap; a quick glance outside confirms that finally, the carriage is slowing. A large mansion on a hill looms in the distance, lit up brilliantly against the night sky. “Now,” Shadow Milk continues, “get into character. We’re here, and you need to open my side for me. Like a gentleman.”

A laugh as Pure Vanilla places his hand upon the door. “Yes, dear.”

When Shadow Milk’s door opens, he’s surprised to find quite a few Cookies waiting expectantly on the sidewalk around the carriage. Not enough to throw him – Lady Milk Crown Cookie is nothing if not poised – but enough to draw a slight arch to his brow. Pure Vanilla offers a hand up to him, gaze lidded and fond; after a moment, Shadow Milk takes it, allowing himself to be gently guided down the carriage’s steps.

When his heels hit the ground, Pure Vanilla’s hand is instantly on his waist, helping steady Shadow Milk for the briefest of moments. Then he steps back, dipping into a half-bow before

offering Shadow Milk his arm with a dazzling smile, staff held tight in the other. “Shall we?” he asks smoothly.

The crowd – for it is a crowd, filled with valets and nobles alike – all murmur with interest, their eyes locked on the pair. Shadow Milk forbids the smile itching at his lips, keeping his expression cool and collected as he gracefully places his hand atop Pure Vanilla’s arm. “Very well,” he replies, tone placid. “Lead on.”

The walk up to the mansion doesn’t take terribly long; the path is gently sloped and smoothly paved, no chance of a heel being caught between uneven stones. Pure Vanilla’s keeping him close, their sides pressed against each other with Shadow Milk’s palm resting daintily in the curve of the other’s elbow. There’s a crowd behind them, an unignorable slew of mutterings of open interest at their back – good. Exactly what Shadow Milk had wanted.

When they crest the top of the hill, there’s only a few steps more leading up to the house; the train of guests are milling about the brightly-lit entrance, drinks in hand and happy smiles on their faces. It’s only as Shadow Milk draws closer that he sees three figures centered in the doorway, greeting each visitor with curtsies and smiles.

Three very, *very* familiar figures.

Pure Vanilla’s arm tightens slightly as they approach; there’s a curious tension in his stride that Shadow Milk picks out with idle curiosity. No matter. Whatever he expects to happen tonight, Shadow Milk intends to impress.

Speaking of, the revoltingly insipid smile on Juniper Berry Cookie’s face brightens instantly the moment she claps eyes on Pure Vanilla; her eyes glimmer with interest, openly raking over his appearance as she steps forward –

Her attention snaps to Lady Milk Crown Cookie on his arm. Her eyes widen; her smile noticeably quivers.

Shadow Milk gazes serenely back at her, a tiny smile of his own gracing his lips.

Perfect.

“Lady Juniper Berry Cookie.” Pure Vanilla’s pulled them to a stop before the others; on either side stands Lady Friand and Lady Pamplemousse, their eyes wide with shock. If Pure Vanilla notices their stunned silence, he doesn’t seem to let it bother him, continuing with a smooth: “My deepest thanks for your invitation. It is always lovely to see you.”

“Pure... Vanilla Cookie,” Juniper Berry Cookie replies, snapping back to herself as she straightens up and gives Shadow Milk a thin smile. Her eyes sweep up and down; there’s a tremble in her hands, clenched tightly in front of her. “And...”

Shadow Milk extends a gloved hand with an effortless smile. “Lady Milk Crown Cookie,” he says smoothly. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Simple. Effective. And, judging by the way Juniper Berry's upper lip curls, utterly devastating.

"Actually," Lady Friand pipes in from the side, "we've met in-"

Lady Pamplemousse shoots her a menacing glare; Lady Friand steps back, mouth snapping shut.

Pure Vanilla glances between the three curiously. "Oh?" he says lightly, expression betraying nothing – but Shadow Milk knows, can taste the amusement glimmering in those depths. "Have you met before?"

"Not that I recall," Shadow Milk replies, adding a careless tilt to his head. Juniper Berry's face flushes scarlet, her mouth trembling as she sweeps her gaze between them. Just as she's about to retort, Shadow Milk carelessly interjects: "Shall we head inside, dear? It's horribly cold out here."

It's brisk at best, but Pure Vanilla's eyes shine as he steps back to lift a hand, taking Shadow Milk's into his own and pressing a chaste kiss to the back of his gloved palm. "Of course, love," he murmurs lowly.

The stunned silence that follows is broken only by Pure Vanilla's quick bow, cheery farewell and the sounds of footsteps as he pulls Shadow Milk alongside him into the mansion.

Well.

Well, well, well.

Shadow Milk lifts his fan to his face, disguising the wide smile spreading on his lips. He looks up to Pure Vanilla, who glances down with an air of deep amusement. It isn't until they've brushed past the rest of the guests – all turning, all staring – and find a small little nook near the main hall that Pure Vanilla pulls Shadow Milk aside and out of sight.

Tucked against the wall chest to chest feels a bit too scandalous for Lady Milk Crown Cookie's taste, but Shadow Milk allows it; Pure Vanilla is smiling ear to ear, eyes crinkled and fond. "I take it," he whispers, keeping his voice low, "that's what you were looking for?"

Shadow Milk's own smile twists into a smirk, eyes lidding dangerously. "Perhaps," he murmurs back. "I must say, I'm impressed. You perform well when you want to. And *love*? That's a new one."

"May I ask," Pure Vanilla continues, openly amused, "how you managed to run afoul of Lady Juniper Berry Cookie in the first place?"

"Irrelevant." Shadow Milk lifts his fan, tapping Pure Vanilla on the chin. "She knows her place now. That's all I needed."

"Oh?" Pure Vanilla's eyes widen. "Are we done, then? Can we leave?"

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes fondly. “Of course not. You have to show me off to everyone else. Don’t think you’re getting out of a dance, either.”

A sigh as Pure Vanilla’s head lolls back, hitting the side of the wall with a soft *thunk*. “I’m not a very good dancer,” he admits with a grimace. “Setting my staff down and then trying to keep up with Cookies moving all around me is-”

“Who said you had to put your staff down?”

Pure Vanilla blinks, head lowering; Shadow Milk gives him a puzzled look, brow perked. “Oh,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment. “Just, ordinarily, I need two hands to-”

“I,” Shadow Milk interrupts, prodding Pure Vanilla’s chest with his fan, “am anything but ordinary. Keep your staff. I’ll outshine every single one of those Cookies no matter what you’re holding. Grab a plate for all I care.” A pause. “But don’t eat anything with sauce. You’ll stain your jacket.”

Pure Vanilla’s giving him an odd look, gaze tracing over Shadow Milk’s blasé expression with a strange sense of appraisal. He then swiftly bends, leaning in close to press a quick kiss to Shadow Milk’s cheek.

Shadow Milk starts, smacking him off with his fan. “Hey! You’ll smudge my foundation! What was that for?!”

“Apologies,” Pure Vanilla hums, in a tone that is anything but apologetic. He then offers his arm out to Shadow Milk, nodding his head towards the main hall. “Shall we, then?”

A huff as Shadow Milk straightens up, smoothing out his dress and hovering a hand over his cheek. “Ugh. Seriously, is there a smudge?”

“You,” Pure Vanilla replies smoothly, “look as lovely and radiant as ever.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “But no smudge?”

“No smudge.”

“Good.” He laces his hand through Pure Vanilla’s arm, giving a gentle nudge with his hips. “Now let’s get out there. I didn’t put in all this effort *not* to be seen.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes glitter as he leads them out, staff tapping on the carpet as he glances down with a smile. “I see you.”

Shadow Milk smiles back, all teeth. “Barely, *love*.”

There’s a loud, bright laugh in reply; Shadow Milk raises his fan, hiding his own chuckle. Pure Vanilla squeezes his arm gently, sparing one last glance before making a sharp turn, leading Shadow Milk down a new, winding hall. As they walk, the sounds of chattering Cookies grow louder and louder; it only takes one more turn before the corridor opens up, spilling into a magnificent, glittering ballroom.

Shadow Milk's steps slow; Pure Vanilla's hesitate in kind until they come to a stop at the entrance, framed perfectly in the door. Shadow Milk casts a sweeping gaze across the room, taking in the sparkling ballgowns twirling across the floor and handsomely dressed Cookies chatting and sipping at crystal glasses. As his eyes trace the fluttering tapestries and glimmering chandeliers overhead, a footman approaches; there's a deep, sweeping bow before he straightens up and asks: "Shall I announce you?"

Pure Vanilla tilts his head, a questioning perk to his brow even as a smile graces his lips. "Well, my dear?"

"Of course." Shadow Milk tosses his head, eyes sharp as his fan snaps open in challenge.

Showtime.

--

Shadow Milk dazzles them all – how could he not?

Pure Vanilla keeps him on his arm at all times, leading Shadow Milk from group to group with surprising aplomb. They are always welcomed, always greeted with eyes shimmering with interest or outright jealousy as Shadow Milk's form is greedily swept up and down. The pleasantries and compliments flow like the juice filling their glasses as Shadow Milk welcomes each new admirer with a sly smile and flutter of his lashes.

His grace is effortless; he glides through the conversations as smoothly as his steps upon the dancefloor. When they ask about him, he slips in coquettish remarks about Pure Vanilla's persistence; when he's offered a dance by some eager young thing, he takes it and allows himself to be twirled across the floor by practiced hands. It never lasts long, always ends with him slipping from their arms with a mischievous wink and a flush to their face – but the effect is more than worth it.

Each time he returns to Pure Vanilla's arms, the grip on Shadow Milk's waist grows just slightly tighter.

Doubly pleasing, Pure Vanilla makes for a very fine dancer.

The rest of the Cookies on the floor give them their space – Shadow Milk makes sure of it – leaving ample room for Pure Vanilla to grasp and lead him as he pleases with staff in hand. They glide across the polished floor, the silvery glint of Shadow Milk's heels stepping in time with Pure Vanilla's own movements. Pure Vanilla twirls him, dips him, even lifts him through the air once, earning a startled laugh from Shadow Milk before he quickly recomposes himself. A gentle swat with his fan in warning before they're pressing together again, a hand gently cupping Shadow Milk's waist as they sway back and forth.

"So," Pure Vanilla murmurs, gaze soft and fond, "how am I doing?"

“Passable,” Shadow Milk hums back; the music’s turning gentle and slow, letting him comfortably rest his hands on Pure Vanilla’s shoulders. “But don’t think I missed that little slip-up with the governor.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes crinkle with mirth. “My apologies.”

“Lady *Smilk* Crown Cookie?” Shadow Milk gives him a small pinch. “*Really?* I give you a single line to memorize and you still flub it.”

“It’s hard,” Pure Vanilla sighs back. “I’m afraid I don’t hold a candle to your mastery of the craft.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Shadow Milk steps back, letting Pure Vanilla follow after as they rock and sway together. “Stick to pet names, then.”

“Of course, love.” A gentle squeeze on Shadow Milk’s hip. “Whatever you say, dear.”

Shadow Milk resists the urge to roll his eyes – Lady Milk Crown Cookie would *never* – but gives the other an amused side-eye just the same.

“Though,” Pure Vanilla adds thoughtfully, “I do think you’re dancing with far too many other men.”

“Oh?” Shadow Milk replies coyly. “Does that bother you?”

“Of course,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “You forget, I am besotted with you. Absolutely smitten. You play upon my jealousies, my love.”

“That I do,” Shadow Milk hums, a pleased smile twitching at his lips. “Now, remind me again who Damson Plum Cookie is?”

“A high-ranking noble from the Hollyberry kingdom.” Pure Vanilla shifts his grip on Shadow Milk’s waist as his staff taps across the floor. “Only met him once, but I liked him. Very wealthy, but also mysterious and extremely reclusive. His lineage is completely unknown.”

“Hm,” Shadow Milk murmurs back. “Not a bad cover you came up with for me, then.”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla smiles back, “As much as I appreciate your creativity, I don’t think a member of the Blueberry clan would be very welcomed here.”

“What happened there, anyway?”

“Don’t ask,” Pure Vanilla sighs. Another squeeze before he continues: “Shall we get some drinks? I’m parched.”

Shadow Milk opens his mouth to reply when-

“Ah, Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

Eugh. Shadow Milk knows that voice.

With only the restraint Lady Milk Crown Cookie can muster, Shadow Milk glances back and offers a polite smile to the mop of perfectly-coifed blonde hair approaching.

Pure Vanilla shares no such reservations, replying cheerfully with: “Good evening, Clotted Cream Cookie!” as Shadow Milk once again resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Clotted Cream Cookie weaves between the dancers with surprising fluidity before coming to an abrupt halt and dipping into a bow. “Pure Vanilla Cookie,” he repeats again, before straightening up and shifting his attention to Shadow Milk. “And this must be your lovely companion. I hear she’s causing quite a stir amongst the guests.” He flashes a perfect smile at Shadow Milk’s uninterested stare. “How wonderful to meet you, Lady-?”

“Lady Milk Crown Cookie.” Shadow Milk, as is custom, offers Clotted Cream Cookie his hand. “Charmed.”

Clotted Cream Cookie takes the proffered hand, bending to press a polite kiss against it. “I wonder,” he remarks aloud, hooded gaze sliding upwards. “Might I trouble such a beautiful lady as yourself for a dance?” Another dazzling smile as he glances to Pure Vanilla. “If the gentleman does not object.”

Pure Vanilla’s grip on Shadow Milk’s waist tightens just shy of bruising. “Well,” Pure Vanilla begins lightly-

“He doesn’t mind,” Shadow Milk interrupts smoothly. With a teasing wink he slides from Pure Vanilla’s grasp, placing his arms on Clotted Cream’s shoulders. “He was just about to fetch refreshments.” A coy glance back, a sly smile. “Weren’t you, dear?”

A flash of – something in Pure Vanilla’s eyes, something that sends a delighted tickle down Shadow Milk’s spine. It’s over as quickly as it’d begun, replaced by Pure Vanilla’s own trademark air of calm. “Oh, of course! I’ll get us some drinks and be right back.”

Shadow Milk smiles to himself as he watches the other leave; he has no real interest in dancing with this puffed-up prat, but Pure Vanilla’s reaction had been more than worth it.

Clotted Cream, annoyingly, is also a fairly good dancer; he twirls and sways with Shadow Milk with the greatest of ease, an unnervingly placid smile on his face the entire time. Shadow Milk barely spares him a glance, gazing vacantly over his shoulder as he mentally urges the band to play faster.

“So,” Clotted Cream Cookie remarks, “are you enjoying your time in the Vanilla Kingdom?”

“Oh, yes,” Shadow Milk says neutrally, eyes trained on the wall. “It’s been lovely.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I was afraid you might find it displeasing, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

A pause; a silence that stretches loudly beneath the ringing music. Shadow Milk slowly slides his gaze to Clotted Cream Cookie’s implacable smile, who merely perks a brow under the scrutiny. “My apologies,” Clotted Cream Cookie says smoothly, “am I being presumptuous?”

Shadow Milk says nothing, only watches him with slowly narrowing eyes as they sway back and forth.

“Forgive me,” Clotted Cream continues, “if I have offended. Only... I could think of no other Pure Vanilla Cookie would bring out of the blue. And the colors of your outfit are...” His eyes gleam. “Familiar. Perhaps you remember me, from the Parfaedia meeting?”

“I remember you,” Shadow Milk replies coldly, “from the markets.”

This, at least, seems to surprise Clotted Cream – or rather, that’s Shadow Milk’s guess from the slight twitch in that perfect smile. “Oh?” Clotted Cream Cookie hums. “Pray tell, when was this? It seems to have slipped my memory.”

“As I recall...” Shadow Milk steps to the side, pulling him abruptly by the shoulder before smoothly slipping back into his arms. “There was talk of banners... defilement... caging of Beasts.”

“Ah.” Recognition sparks in Clotted Cream’s eyes. “When I was escorting Vanilla Sugar Cookie. I take it you were there, then? What a shame we could not meet properly.”

“Yes, such a shame,” Shadow Milk drawls. “I felt so welcomed.”

“My sincerest apologies.” Clotted Cream inclines his head, his hair brushing slightly against Shadow Milk’s forehead; Shadow Milk fights back a grimace at the sensation. “You see,” he Clotted Cream continues, straightening up, “we of the Crème Republic are rather protective of our ancestral homeland. And of Pure Vanilla Cookie himself.”

“I have no interest in your pleasantries, boy.” Shadow Milk’s words are cool and crisp, his grip on Clotted Cream’s shoulders tightening viciously. “Spit out what you have come to say.”

“Very well.” If there is pain from Shadow Milk’s grasp to be had, Clotted Cream isn’t showing a lick of it; his gaze is steady as he asks: “How long do you intend to remain in the Vanilla Kingdom?”

A spike of anger, red-hot and biting; Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s disinterested stare does not flinch, even as Shadow Milk bares his teeth inwardly. “Pardon?”

“I meant what I said when you’ve caused quite a stir.” Clotted Cream has the gall to bend low, dipping Shadow Milk to the music before pulling him up again. “To say you have become the subject of vicious scandal would be to put it mildly. Pure Vanilla Cookie himself has become seen as unreliable, untrustworthy in going to such lengths to keep you housed here – a fast-spreading sentiment now shared by far more than just the Crème Republic, I assure you.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow to slits, even as Clotted Cream smiles placidly back at him. “I care not for your politics.”

“I did not presume so. Still...” Clotted Cream tilts his head, considering. “I cannot help but wonder what your plans are. Do you intend to simply ruin him amongst his peers? Or is there something more? Perhaps you have your eyes on his Soul Jam, as so many others before you?”

Presumptuous. Vile. There are none before him, not even Pure Vanilla himself.

“Forgive me,” Clotted Cream repeats again, eyes glimmering. “As I said, I have no wish to offend. The Crème Republic is simply... curious.”

Shadow Milk’s heel comes up and under; with a swift pull, he yanks Clotted Cream’s ankle out from under him, sending the other Cookie sprawling to the floor. There’s a startled gasp from the crowd, a gentle murmuring as Shadow Milk Cookie folds one arm across his chest, his hand coming up to idly brush at his cheek.

“My,” he drawls, “how clumsy of you, Clotted Cream Cookie. Still uncertain of how to dance with a lady?”

Clotted Cream Cookie looks up, brushing the hair back from his face; there’s a moment of clarity, something piercing in his eyes before it slips back into practiced calm. “My apologies,” he replies with a smile. “My lady. Shall we continue?”

“I think not.” Shadow Milk’s eyes lid as he casts a careless gaze around the room. “Pure Vanilla Cookie is waiting, after all.”

“Of course.” Clotted Cream Cookie is rising to his feet, dusting off his lapels before dipping into a quick bow. “Good evening, Lady Milk Crown Cookie.”

Shadow Milk simply hums back, turning away as he slips between dancers to exit the floor.

Infuriating. Despicable, annoying little wretch. It takes all of Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s comports to keep the sneer off Shadow Milk’s face as he wanders between busy partygoers. To think that blond little fop has the audacity to approach him like that, to challenge Shadow Milk directly –

Well, as direct as politicians get anyway.

Even more infuriatingly, Pure Vanilla is nowhere to be seen. Shadow Milk weaves between the crowds of Cookies, eyes narrowing bit by bit as he’s greeted by dazzled expressions and greedy looks drinking him in – but no Pure Vanilla Cookie. He can’t even enjoy all the attention that follows him with each step because he has to keep moving, has to keep looking for-

“Pure Vanilla Cookie?”

The name immediately snaps Shadow Milk’s attention over; there’s two plump Cookies seated at a nearby table, a glass of juice in each of their hands.

“Oh, yes,” the smaller one says. “Haven’t you heard? He’s in attendance tonight.”

“Really?” the other muses, swirling her glass. “I heard about the Dark Cacao Kingdom leaving a few days ago. Do you think they-?”

“Disposed of the beast? I should think so.”

Shadow Milk’s jam turns cold.

“Oh, they must have, mustn’t they?” A sip of juice, before: “It’s the first time Pure Vanilla’s been seen in public since. Dark Cacao Cookie must have slain it for him.”

“I’ve heard such terrible things,” is sighed back. “Oh, my grandfather had the Jellies scared out of him at the meeting just two weeks ago by that... creature.”

“He’s quite brave. Imagine poor Pure Vanilla Cookie, stuck all alone at the hands of such a fiend.” The glass is raised, drink sloshing within. “To Dark Cacao Cookie! For slaying the-”

The glasses abruptly shatter in their palms; the women give squeals of alarm, wiping frantically at their soaked dresses –

Shadow Milk is not there to see it. He’s already rushing past them, heart hammering in his chest.

The crowds – the smiling, beaming crowds – feel suffocating. Each appraising eye turned towards him feels calculating, not admiring; there’s so little room to move, forced to brush against Cookie after Cookie as Shadow Milk’s wild gaze sweeps the room, forbidding the emotion seizing in his core. He can’t show it, can’t let a flicker out – Lady Milk Crown Cookie demands composure, demands perfection.

To say you have become the subject of vicious scandal would be to put it mildly.

Shadow Milk ducks out of the way of a waiter, weaving between the partygoers as he searches and searches-

How long do you intend to remain in the Vanilla Kingdom?

Clotted Cream’s words ring mockingly in Shadow Milk’s ears; there’s a tremble in his arms, something dark and anxious chewing at him as Shadow Milk keeps striding forward. He’s not sure if the lights flickering overhead are from him or simple coincidence, but he’s nearly circled the whole room now, only a few steps left before-

There.

Of course there, of course in the last place he looked. Pure Vanilla Cookie, shining as brilliantly as ever, tucked in the corner by the drinks table with staff in hand – and surrounded by Cookies.

Shadow Milk’s steps slow.

Pure Vanilla is completely encircled, a gracious yet strained smile on his lips. A full crowd of Cookies – Lady Juniper Berry Cookie included - are clamoring for his attention. Swathes of

beautiful ladies and upstanding gentleman all pressing in close, all chattering away with eager smiles. They – adore him. It's plain on their faces, on the way they beam and laugh at his every word.

Pure Vanilla does not need Shadow Milk here to dazzle anyone at all.

Shadow Milk had needed him.

There's a glance, a moment where their eyes lock; Shadow Milk sees recognition dawn, sees a trace of a real smile as Pure Vanilla's expression brightens. The other reaches out through the crowd, a name on his lips-

Not Shadow Milk's name. A false identity, a persona to wear like a second skin.

Shadow Milk Cookie is not welcome here.

There's a ringing in his ears, a chill that's clutching at his dough as Shadow Milk's breaths come in quick, short bursts. It feels as if time is slowing to a crawl all around him; his movements feel sluggish, his forehead feverish. The clamor of the Cookies cheering and dancing all blend together into a garbled chorus of unintelligible noise, dragging painfully at the back of his skull.

Another quick, shaky breath as Shadow Milk's gaze slides to the left, spotting a small balcony outcropping – the door looks locked but no matter. No matter. None of this matters.

They're playing. This is a game, and they're simply playing their parts.

Shadow Milk ignores Pure Vanilla's call, striding through the crowd towards the balcony doors; he pulls them open with a pulse of magic, stepping through and abruptly re-locking them behind him. A flick of his wrist and the large curtains tucked on either side flutter downwards, obscuring him from view as they swing and sway before falling to stillness.

Another breath, more steps forward as Shadow Milk stumbles – no, he can't stumble, that's not what Lady Milk Crown Cookie does. His vision feels hazy, something horrible twisting in his chest as he leans forward, palms planting on the balcony railing. He feels sick, nauseous and anxious in the same breath and it's dizzying in how fiercely it grips at him. He pants open-mouthed, willing calm, willing the serenity he needs to slip back into his role.

He's the problem here. Lady Milk Crown Cookie is poised, refined, indifferent to the mutterings of lower Cookies. None of this matters to Lady Milk Crown Cookie; none of this affects her. He needs to be her, has to be her because she's the only one who fits any of this. This is her world, her stage, not his. He'd slipped, been too – himself. And he can't.

He can't be Shadow Milk Cookie tonight. Not here. Not now.

Another deep gulp of air as Shadow Milk tries to calm the racing in his chest. He scolds himself; truly, slipping so far out of character? Shameful. This is what he gets. He tries to crane his neck up, focusing on the night sky, on the chill seeping into his dough from the icy night air.

In and out. Slow and steady. No sound but his own, rattled breaths –

And the clicking of a lock.

A flicker of anger, a furious glance back – but the gentle glow of light on the handle tells Shadow Milk all he needs to know. He turns back around, refusing to acknowledge the intrusion as the door creaks open.

“Shadow Milk Cookie?”

Not his name.

The sound of the door shutting, the locks clicking back into place accompanied by the sound of fabric rustling as Pure Vanilla pushes through the curtains. “Shadow Milk Cookie?” is called again.

Not. His. Name.

The sound of steps approaching accompanied by the familiar tapping of a staff. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter.” Shadow Milk – no. Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s voice is calm and collected, the fan in her palm snapping open to flutter before her face. She’s not turned around, but that’s only because the sky looks so beautiful tonight.

“You left in a hurry.” Another step, another tap of the staff. “You locked the doors.”

“I only wished for some privacy.” Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s idle gaze traces along the pattern of stars in the sky. “A bit of peace and quiet.”

“What happened?” Pure Vanilla draws ever closer; Lady Milk Crown Cookie can feel him at her back. “Can you tell me?”

A sigh as Lady Milk Crown Cookie turns; she meets Pure Vanilla’s worried stare with a placid smile. “You’re quite terrible at this, you know.”

Pure Vanilla’s brow furrows. “I’m sorry?”

A lift of her fan, tracing delicately along the curve of his chin. “You’re very rude,” she says calmly. “Getting my name wrong. Pestering me when I’ve given you my answer twice. It’s no way to treat a lady.”

A frown as Pure Vanilla lifts a hand, reaching out. “Shadow Milk-”

Lady Milk Crown Cookie smacks his hand away instantly; the sound of it echoes through the night air. The look of shock on Pure Vanilla’s face is plain, but draws no spark of sympathy as Lady Milk Crown Cookie narrows her gaze. “I’ve already told you,” she says quietly. “We’re playing a game.” Her fan snaps shut. “If you’re not going to play, step away from the board.”

And with that she turns, putting her back to Pure Vanilla Cookie in full. Her hands lace together in front of her, eyes trained up on the sky as she breathes in and out. Practiced. Collected. Perfect.

Pure Vanilla is silent at her back. He doesn't move, but she knows well enough to wait. There'd be retreating footsteps soon, that damnable tapping of his staff as he makes his exit. She simply has to stand here and watch the sky. Lady Milk Crown Cookie is patient; Lady Milk Crown Cookie has never had a reason not to be.

A soft sound behind her; Pure Vanilla's clearing his throat. A pause, before:

"Lady Milk Crown Cookie."

Ah. Her name. It's enough to draw her attention, a single glance backwards. Pure Vanilla's expression is still uncertain, but the mere trace of her attention seems to bring a flicker of a smile to his lips. "My... apologies, Lady Milk Crown Cookie. Can you forgive my impoliteness?"

Lady Milk Crown Cookie turns around again, a graceful tilt to her head as she considers him. "I can," she says after a moment. "Is that all you wished to say?"

"No." Pure Vanilla's got a strange gleam in his eye; his shoulders square, he straightens up in full. "I... need to apologize again."

"Oh?" Her brow perks up. "Whatever for, Pure Vanilla Cookie?"

Pure Vanilla looks Lady Milk Crown Cookie over carefully, cautious gaze slowly melting into open fondness. "I..." Pure Vanilla raises a hand, clearing his throat. "You are... very beautiful, Lady Milk Crown Cookie. I do not think there is a single Cookie here who is lovelier than you."

"There isn't," Lady Milk Crown Cookie replies indifferently.

"But," Pure Vanilla continues, "Despite all your loveliness and grace, I'm afraid I have been unfaithful towards you." He dips his head in a bow. "For that, I beg your forgiveness."

"Unfaithful," Lady Milk Crown Cookie repeats, the word acrid on her tongue. "Explain yourself, Pure Vanilla Cookie."

Pure Vanilla straightens up, expression still openly fond. "You see," he says quietly, "though I enjoy your company, I fear there is another who has lingered on my mind all night."

Lady Milk Crown Cookie raises her chin, eyes narrowing. "Ah," she says coolly, "how fickle are the hearts of men."

"Indeed," Pure Vanilla affirms. "For indeed, with every step I took with you, I have been filled with longing for the chance to dance with Lord Shadow Milk Cookie instead."

A flash of something hot, searing, dizzying; a clutch to his, no, her chest as Lady Milk Crown Cookie instantly composes herself. "My," she remarks after a moment, voice thin. "Such

ingratitude. Lord Shadow Milk Cookie would make for a poor choice of partner tonight indeed.”

“I disagree.” Pure Vanilla’s smile is unyielding as he steps closer – too deep into her personal space, too improper for a lady. “I would greatly enjoy the chance to dance with him. I think he’d be excellent at it.”

Lady Milk Crown Cookie sharply turns her head away; something’s flickering in her chest, a flutter of emotions not her own. “Fool,” she says sharply – no. She doesn’t say that. Those aren’t her words. Her eyes press closed, steadying herself. “Such impropriety. Shadow Milk Cookie has no place in those halls.”

“I disagree,” Pure Vanilla repeats kindly. “I think beside me is exactly where he belongs.”

“And what of your fragile alliances?” Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s tone has taken on a sharp edge. “What of your worries of *great offense* and *hurt feelings*?”

“Ah.” Pure Vanilla’s eyes lid in open fondness. “I’m afraid, Lady Milk Crown Cookie, that I would not risk such things for you.” His hand raises, hovering cautiously over her cheek. “I would do so happily, however, for him.”

A laugh, half-choked – not hers. Someone else’s, someone who is dangerously close to slipping out. “You fool. What would you even do with him?”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla hums, “if it pleased him, I’d like to dance. Perhaps in mid-air, as he’s so fond of.” Pure Vanilla’s hand grazes gently against her cheek. “High above the crowds, where everyone can see him, just how he likes.”

A strained warble, a trembling grin. Lady Milk Crown Cookie closes her eyes; when they reopen, Shadow Milk Cookie gazes up at Pure Vanilla with a warped smile. “You fool,” he repeats hoarsely. “Is dancing with me really so important?”

“There he is.” Pure Vanilla’s hand cups Shadow Milk’s cheek, smile soft and tender. “Hello, Shadow Milk Cookie. I missed you.”

“Shut up,” Shadow Milk sighs, leaning into the touch. “You’re going to smudge my foundation, you know.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla bends, leaning in to press a kiss to the opposite cheek. “Now they match.”

Shadow Milk hums, a new sort of fatigue trickling down through his body. He’s suddenly acutely aware of the throbbing in his feet from the walking, how flimsy the material of his dress feels in the cold night air. There’s something else, something unsettling and nervous fluttering around in his chest – that, at least, he can ignore for now. “I’m tired,” he sighs, more to himself than anything.

Pure Vanilla’s hand rubs gently across Shadow Milk’s cheek. “Are we done playing?” he asks softly. “I’d very much like to spend the rest of the night with you instead, if that’s alright.”

Another sigh as Shadow Milk's shoulders slump. "Yes, yes, alright."

The lock on the balcony jiggles; Shadow Milk and Pure Vanilla tense as one. The handle turns, a familiar voice calling out:

"Pure Vanilla Cookie? Are you there?"

Juniper Berry Cookie.

The door begins creaking open and Shadow Milk Cookie – impulsive, petty, vindictive – makes a split-second decision.

He grabs Pure Vanilla by the lapel – makes a brief, firm second of eye contact as the other stares back in surprise – then yanks Pure Vanilla into a kiss.

The door swings open in full; Shadow Milk knows because the sound in Juniper Berry's throat dies in a strained gurgle.

Shadow Milk's eyes are shut, expression carefully schooled into neutrality as he presses his lips against Pure Vanilla's; he even takes the time to wrap his arms around the other's neck, deepening the kiss as he tilts his head to the side. Pure Vanilla isn't moving, is stiff as statue – Shadow Milk wonders, briefly, if this might have been a mistake.

There's another strangled squeak and furious footsteps retreating; the door slams shut behind her and Shadow Milk pulls away, taking in a sharp breath of air as he turns and shoots the still-swishing curtains a victorious grin.

"Hah!" he barks, glancing back to Pure Vanilla. "That'll keep her off... your..."

Pure Vanilla is still staring at him, eyes wide. He hasn't moved an inch, gaze searching as his grip on his staff tightens.

Shadow Milk grimaces back. Oof. Alright, probably had been a mistake. "Sorry, sorry," he sighs, closing his eyes with a shrug of his shoulders. "Just wanted to show her up! I shouldn't have."

"She's still there."

A pause stretches between them; Shadow Milk reopens his eyes, fixing Pure Vanilla with an incredulous stare. "What?"

"She's-" Pure Vanilla clears his throat; his expression is inscrutable, yet oddly intense. He steps closer, eyes locked into Shadow Milk's own. "Still there."

Shadow Milk glances backwards; the heavy curtains obscuring the glass doors haven't moved. It'd be difficult to get more than a peek through such slim slivers of light – still, it's not entirely impossible.

Is she there? Can Pure Vanilla's staff truly pick her out from so far?

A hand is touching the back of Shadow Milk's neck; Pure Vanilla's leaning in, an unsteady air about him as his gaze flicks between Shadow Milk's eyes and the door. "She's looking," he insists, voice far more hoarse than Shadow Milk's ever heard.

Interesting.

Shadow Milk allows a small smirk to grace his lips. "Well," he purrs, eyes lidding. "If she's looking."

Pure Vanilla's the one to yank him in this time, grip tight – as if afraid Shadow Milk will pull away again. The press of his lips is desperate, ravenous; gone is the boring old statue from before. Shadow Milk grins into the kiss, amusement tickling in his jam as he laces his arms lazily around Pure Vanilla's waist, drinking in the other's feverish desperation and heady vanilla scent.

Kissing's nice. It's been so long, he'd nearly forgotten.

Shadow Milk hums happily beneath the attention, pressing closer; Pure Vanilla responds by dropping his staff, earning a startled laugh from Shadow Milk at the clatter as he's pulled in by two arms tight around his chest. Pure Vanilla shudders against him; though he'll deny it, there's a pleasant shiver running down Shadow Milk's back too as he deepens the kiss with a heady gasp.

It's not until it's clear that Pure Vanilla has no interest in coming up for air that Shadow Milk decides to put on the brakes; a daring nip to his lower lip has Shadow Milk rolling his eyes, thumping firmly on Pure Vanilla's back. In an instant he is released, Pure Vanilla setting him down with a dazed expression and thoroughly flushed cheeks.

Shadow Milk's not sure how his own look's faring, but it can't be proper enough for Lady Milk Crown Cookie.

"Alright, calm down," Shadow Milk says lazily. He lifts his hands, running them through his thoroughly-mussed hair; slowly, the vestiges of his magic drip off him in rolling shadows, revealing his true form beneath. Lady Milk Crown Cookie had served him well, but clearly, Pure Vanilla Cookie is no gentleman.

How amusing.

Pure Vanilla licks his lips, bending down instinctively to grasp at his staff. "Well," he rasps tentatively. "She... might still be-"

"She's gone," Shadow Milk drawls, a hand on his hip. "Long gone. Besides, didn't you say you wanted to dance with me?"

That earns him a quick startle; Pure Vanilla jolts upright, staff clenched in both hands as he quickly nods. "Oh! Yes, yes, that's-!" A smile, still tinged with lingering nerves. "That'd be lovely, Shadow Milk Cookie."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes again; a quick glance down as he inspects himself, turning his legs to the left and right. “Hm. Not dressed for the occasion, am I?”

Pure Vanilla winces. “Oh, no, please, don’t change back-”

“I’m not,” Shadow Milk interrupts with a laugh. “Calm down.” He glances up at Pure Vanilla for a moment, leaning in to squint as he studies the man. A sweeping gaze, a considering tilt to the head as Shadow Milk clicks his tongue. “Alright,” he decides.

A blink as Pure Vanilla stares back. “Alright what?”

Shadow Milk bows, twirling his wrist with a theatrical flair as he summons his cane to his palm. He lifts it up, giving a firm tap to the top of his head; magic slides down over him, draping over his form as silky fabric glides into place all around him. When Shadow Milk’s done, he straightens up, planting both hands on his hips as he gives a toothy grin.

He’s clad in an exact copy of Pure Vanilla’s own suit, whites and golds replaced by his own blues and blacks. Shadow Milk perks a brow, motioning to himself. “Hm? Better?”

“I,” Pure Vanilla laughs, eyes fond, “never said anything in the first place. But…” Pure Vanilla tilts his head, gaze softening. “It’s very thematically appropriate, my other half.”

“Oh, shut up.” Shadow Milk leans over, taking hold of Pure Vanilla’s hand and tugging him forward. “Come on. You want to dance, or not?”

Pure Vanilla glances between him and the door behind. “Should we not head inside?”

“Not in there.” Shadow Milk pushes himself up off the ground, floating upwards; Pure Vanilla’s head lifts as he follows the movement in wonder. “You’re right,” Shadow Milk remarks. “I do prefer mid-air. So, we’re going to dance my way.”

“Out here?” Pure Vanilla queries, though judging by his smile, he doesn’t seem opposed. “Are you sure? As I said, I wouldn’t mind-”

“Shush.” Shadow Milk grabs Pure Vanilla’s other hand, clasping both tightly in his own; he angles his face out of the staff’s way with a roll of his eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you, I’ll do whatever I please. It pleases me to dance out here. Be thankful I’m giving you a solo show; that’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance for most.”

Another laugh as Pure Vanilla’s hands squeeze gently in his grasp. “Alright,” he chuckles. “But, I’m afraid there’s not much room on the balcony alo- oh!” Pure Vanilla lets out a startled gasp as he too begins floating upwards; not quickly, just a slow, lazy rise as Shadow Milk grins down at him. “Oh, you’re-!”

“Shush,” Shadow Milk repeats; he floats backwards and up, pulling Pure Vanilla along with him. With his magic, the other is light as a feather – even if he still needs to eat more. “Like I said,” Shadow Milk continues, “we’re dancing my way.” He nods towards the sky. “Night is a much prettier backdrop than that gaudy hall anyway.”

Pure Vanilla beams at him; his feet tap tentatively at the air, finding no purchase even as Shadow Milk loops a hand around his waist. “And,” Pure Vanilla adds smoothly, “I have a much prettier partner.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Don’t insult Lady Milk Crown Cookie,” he says, tone deadly serious.

A blink before Pure Vanilla dips his head apologetically. “Sorry.”

There’s a gentle tug as Shadow Milk pulls them upwards, only slowing to a halt when they’ve hovering at roof-level. His right hand is wrapped around Pure Vanilla’s waist, the other resting comfortably upon the other’s wrist – he cannot truly clasp both with the staff in hand, but it doesn’t matter. All the better for Pure Vanilla to see him with.

The music that slowly drifts through the night sky is a symphony of Shadow Milk’s own making; he begins to sway, stepping back and tugging Pure Vanilla effortlessly along with him. The other says nothing, but his expression is openly fond as he leans into the motions, a silent laugh upon his lips.

They glide through the air upon Shadow Milk’s magics, the moon a perfect backdrop as Shadow Milk twirls them to the music. A graceful dip that wrings another giggle from Pure Vanilla’s lips, a theatrical bow before Shadow Milk spins him twice and catches him by the shoulder. Pure Vanilla’s laughing through it all, smiling as he lets Shadow Milk lead, never once looking away with that soft, tender gaze.

Shadow Milk glances away once; just towards the moon, to stick his tongue out over Pure Vanilla’s shoulder.

It’s remarkably cathartic.

Eventually the dancing slows; the music too drifts into a gentler melody as they rock and sway, bodies pressed together as they lean against the other. The pulsing of their Soul Jams blend into a blissful, hazy sensation, nestled just inches away from the other. Pure Vanilla tucks his chin over Shadow Milk’s head with a contented sigh; Shadow Milk bites back the urge to comment on the other’s height, letting it slide this one time. For now.

Something’s still bothering Shadow Milk though, something that has nothing to do with the tingling that’s yet to leave his lips.

“Pure Vanilla Cookie?”

A soft hum of acknowledgement, vibrating from the other’s throat.

There’s a moment of hesitation as Shadow Milk picks his words; maybe he shouldn’t even ask them in the first place, but impulsivity seems to be the theme tonight. “Why did you do all this?”

“Hm?” Pure Vanilla pulls his head back, giving Shadow Milk a curious look. “What do you mean? You asked me to come.”

“Not tonight.” Shadow Milk keeps his gaze trained on the horizon, avoiding Pure Vanilla’s searching stare. “I mean all of this.”

“All of this?”

“You had no reason to keep me around in the first place.” Shadow Milk watches the light of a home glimmer in the distance. “Not a real one. I’ve only made things worse for you.”

“I disagree,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back.

“You know what I mean. And you know what I’m asking.”

There’s a moment of quiet; they continue rocking together as Shadow Milk waits the other out. He knows Pure Vanilla’s thinking, picking his words just as Shadow Milk had; it isn’t until there’s a light squeeze to Shadow Milk’s back that he knows the other’s ready.

“I was lonely too.”

Shadow Milk recoils, the reflexive spark of indignation shooting up as he gives Pure Vanilla a disbelieving once-over. When Pure Vanilla only gazes back with sad eyes, Shadow Milk averts his and barks a laugh. “Hah! The most adored man in the kingdom, lonely? You’re going to have to come up with a better one than that, Nilly.”

“There is a difference,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back, “between being adored and being loved.”

A huff as Shadow Milk spares him an angry glance upwards. “Shut up. You have lots of friends. What would *they* say to that, hm?”

“I do,” Pure Vanilla affirms quietly. “Black Raisin Cookie and the villagers are very dear to me. As are Gingerbrave and his companions, Strawberry Crepe Cookie, and many others.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “So? You’re proving my point here.”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes close; his movements slow as quiet settles around them. Another beat, a melancholy pulse between the Soul Jams before Pure Vanilla murmurs: “So despite all the love I hold for them, despite every precious moment I treasure at their side - eventually, they will disappear from my life. And I will still be here.” A small, sad smile. “The price of immortality. You know it well too, no?”

There’s no right answer to that. Shadow Milk averts his gaze to bury his face in Pure Vanilla’s chest, ignoring the tug in his heart as a kiss is pressed to the top of his head. “Still,” Shadow Milk remarks after a moment, “you have the Ancients. Dark Cacao Cookie made that *perfectly* clear.”

“I do,” Pure Vanilla sighs. “But... in some small, selfish part of me, they are also the source of my deepest regrets.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow, even though Pure Vanilla can’t see it. “Oh? Do tell.”

“I know that the foundings of our kingdoms were important. I know there is no point in dwelling on what could have been.” Pure Vanilla rests his chin back atop Shadow Milk’s head. “But... some small part of me has always wondered how things might have turned out if I’d spoken my mind the day we parted. If I hadn’t held back about how I wished to remain by their sides, no matter what. Would Dark Enchantress Cookie still plague the world if I’d simply been honest in that moment?” A sigh, low and heavy. “A pointless, selfish desire. The world needed us. They’d have been wrong to indulge me.”

Shadow Milk allows a trace of a smile to grace his lips. “Sheesh. Even when you’re being selfish, you’re still blaming yourself for other Cookies’ mistakes? You’re more dramatic than I am.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles, the vibrations tickling at Shadow Milk’s dough. “Perhaps,” he hums. “But, to answer your question – you were like me. Are like me. Although I badly wished to help you, I also thought that even if you continued to harm me – as long as I could keep you from harming anyone else – I was ready to accept that if it meant not being alone anymore.”

“Geez.” Shadow Milk shakes his head, rubbing his forehead against Pure Vanilla’s chest. “That’s dark, Nilly.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla hums back. “As I said, I can be selfish. Despite my best efforts, I still do not yet understand the magics of our bond. Yet I have little doubt my desires influenced its creation.” A gentle squeeze. “And for that, I am sorry.”

Shadow Milk simply hums in reply. Unsurprising, more self-sacrificing than even he’d expected – but a reasonable answer, knowing the Cookie clinging to him.

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues, “what of you?”

“What of me?”

“Your companions.” Pure Vanilla shifts slightly in Shadow Milk’s arms. “Candy Apple and Black Sapphire Cookie. You haven’t spoken of them since your arrival, and I was... hesitant to inquire.”

“Oh.” Shadow Milk pulls back from the embrace; a careless flick of his wrist and two tarot cards appear in his hand. “They’re right here.”

Pure Vanilla blinks, a slight recoil to his head as Shadow Milk offers the cards. “They’re-” His brow furrows. “What?” He takes the cards in hand, turning them over in confusion – then recoiling again as the images on the card begin to move.

Shadow Milk watches idly as Candy Apple and Black Sapphire’s illustrations flicker and dance within the illustrated borders. “My other-realm. You’re well acquainted. Or, rather, a subspace within it.” He floats backwards, arms crossing behind his head. “A perfect fantasy land for my followers, filled with the sweetest lies you could possibly imagine.”

“Are they...” Pure Vanilla turns the cards over; Shadow Milk glimpses Candy Apple silently cackling, a flickering blue flame at her feet. “Are they trapped?”

“Of course not,” Shadow Milk snaps. “They can come and go as they please. Though...” A shrug. “Those two usually don’t. Not unless I call for them.”

“But they adore you.” Pure Vanilla passes the cards back; Shadow Milk dismisses them into shadows with another flick of his wrist. “I’m surprised they didn’t ask to join you here.”

“Oh, they don’t know,” Shadow Milk replies, another casual shrug of his shoulder.

Pure Vanilla tilts his head. “You didn’t tell them?”

Shadow Milk gives him an amused once-over. “You didn’t tell yours.”

“Fair enough.” Pure Vanilla extends a hand; Shadow Milk takes it as Pure Vanilla motions towards the roof. “May we sit? I’d like to rest a bit.”

“Sure.” Shadow Milk leads him over, a gentle tug until they’re both hovering over the tiles. A small pull downwards until they’re both sitting – Shadow Milk’s still hovering in the air, but Pure Vanilla’s settling down in full, tucking his knees up to his chin. He gives Shadow Milk another once-over, still a spark of curiosity in his eyes before he suddenly remarks:

“You could, though.”

Shadow Milk glances over, hands behind his head. “Hm?”

“You could tell them.” Pure Vanilla motions with his hand, mimicking the cards. “If you’d like. As your companions, they’re welcome within my home.”

A snort before Shadow Milk bares his teeth in a grin. “Cute. You know Candy Apple Cookie will try to crumble you immediately, right?”

Another laugh from Pure Vanilla. “She was... rather intense about you.”

“The burden of being spectacular.” Shadow Milk returns his eyes to the sky. “They’re happy. I see no reason to disturb them. Besides, they don’t age in my other-realm; I don’t like to call them out without good cause.”

“Really!” Pure Vanilla blinks in surprise. “Not at all?”

“Nope.” Shadow Milk traces the curve of the moon with his eyes. “They also tend to come as a pair; Black Sapphire rarely ventures out without Candy Apple Cookie, and vice versa. That sibling-like bond of theirs is probably the reason they’re the only two left.”

“The only two?”

Ah. He’d spoken without thinking. How rare for him.

Pure Vanilla’s curious stare is relentless; Shadow Milk lets out a sigh of his own. “I told you – they can come and go from my realm as they please. All my followers could.” A pause, a flicker of unbidden memory brushing by. “I had quite a few back in the day. I’m very charming, you know.”

“I know,” Pure Vanilla affirms, voice clearly prompting him to continue.

“But,” Shadow Milk drawls, “getting sealed away forever is a bit of a drag on the old recruitment factor. While my followers could have existed forever in my other-realm, they all eventually left, one-by-one. And,” he continues with a careless wave of his hand, “what fools they were for it! They’ve all crumbled away by now, more interested in their pointless day-to-day lives than my sweet lies. Serves them right!”

Pure Vanilla places a hand on Shadow Milk’s arm. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I did not know.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” Shadow Milk leans up, giving Pure Vanilla a flick to the forehead. “Seriously, I *just* said it serves them right.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla catches his hand, grasping it tight. “But you were left alone. It is still a loss, even if you do not mourn them.”

Shadow Milk sighs; he rolls over, pushing Pure Vanilla down. There’s a small squeak of surprise as he straddles the other’s chest, arms coming up to fold across his own. “You’re being far too sappy tonight,” he drawls. “You’re projecting your loneliness onto me.”

“Am I?” Pure Vanilla’s lidded gaze is far too content. “My apologies. I suppose going all night without you- *mrrph*.”

Shadow Milk’s placed his palm over Pure Vanilla’s mouth, silencing whatever gushy little quip he’d been preparing. “We,” Shadow Milk says languidly, “have not connected in several days. I am far more interested in that than anymore discussions of the past.” He leans in close, perking a brow. “Shall I assume that’s something you’re interested in too?”

Pure Vanilla slowly nods, mouth still firmly covered.

“Then,” Shadow Milk continues, teeth baring in a grin, “it seems to me like we have our pick of the rooms.” He motions to the house. “What do you think? Closet? Library? Juniper Berry Cookie’s bedroom?”

A snort as Pure Vanilla lifts a hand, brushing away Shadow Milk’s own. “Have you not tormented that poor girl enough? You’d roll around in her own sheets?”

“Good point. I wouldn’t want you smelling like another woman.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles. “While that’s all well and good – can we not simply return home?”

“Really?” Shadow Milk pouts. “No adventurous spirit, Nilly? No touch of danger to make it more fun?”

“I am an old man,” Pure Vanilla replies languidly, “as you so love to point out. Forgive me for wishing to enjoy you in the privacy of my own home.”

A deep, heavy sigh as Shadow Milk lifts off him, rising up through the air with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Fine.” He sticks out his arm, offering Pure Vanilla a hand up. “Let’s go,

then?”

Pure Vanilla smiles, reaching out to take the offered hand. “Home?”

“Yeah,” Shadow Milk replies, a smile of his own gracing his lips. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter 19

Pure Vanilla's been acting funny recently.

Not in an amusing sense – not any more than his usual eye-roll worthy antics anyway – but there's something different about him that itches strangely in Shadow Milk's dough. It's hard to place exactly what it is, but Shadow Milk certainly knows when it started.

Returning to the castle the night of the dance had been an unremarkable trip in and of itself; a simple carriage ride in quiet, even if Shadow Milk had caught Pure Vanilla watching him one too many times before the other had quickly glanced away. Their typical energy had returned the moment they'd begun climbing the steps to Pure Vanilla's room, Shadow Milk tugging him along with a wicked grin as Pure Vanilla had stumbled and laughed breathlessly behind him.

The usual antics had occurred; shoving Pure Vanilla onto the bedspread, hovering over him with a menacing smile. Perhaps there'd been a little bit of teasing going on, holding their Soul Jams *juuuust* far enough apart to pull a needy little sound from Pure Vanilla's throat before Shadow Milk so kindly, oh so graciously had closed the distance.

Reality melting away in blissful harmony, their selves melding and caressing at each other in blurs of color accompanied by soft, singing sighs – all commonplace. Nothing had been out of the ordinary in the slightest, just slipping into dreams accompanied by disorienting fragments of memories of the ball they'd just slipped away from.

When the memory of their kiss had shone brightly in his mind, Shadow Milk had thought nothing of it. It certainly stood out from the others, but perhaps it had just lingered on Pure Vanilla's mind from the shock of it all. It had been an enjoyable experience, one that brought a pleasant warmth to his jam to recall, but he truly hadn't lingered on it any longer than that.

When they'd woken the next morning, Shadow Milk had been mutedly surprised to find Pure Vanilla's arms wrapped around him. The other had nestled up against him in the night, head tucked into the curve of Shadow Milk's shoulder – again, not outright alarming, but the experience was rather new. Mostly they kept to themselves, Shadow Milk being a bit of a toss-and-turner; yet somehow Pure Vanilla had managed to cling onto him regardless.

Normally, Shadow Milk wouldn't have spared a second thought to such exchanges. Pure Vanilla's a cuddler, Shadow Milk knows this, and he has no complaints about waking up to being enveloped by extra warmth instead of having to seek it out. But the peculiar thing is that what should have been a one-off occurrence keeps happening - along with other, stranger mannerisms that are beginning to draw his attention.

Pure Vanilla has always been rather smiley, always keeping an air of contentment and calm about him; or at least, until Shadow Milk starts purposefully prodding at him. Yet lately Shadow Milk keeps glancing over to find the other watching him at odd moments; even worse, Pure Vanilla seems completely unapologetic about it. Shooting the other a curious

look or a scowl only earns Shadow Milk a brighter, cheerier grin in return. Suspicious. Puzzling.

There's been a slight increase in the cheek kissing, too. While they'd initially been scattered, Pure Vanilla now seems dead-set on giving Shadow Milk one every morning and every night in what's bordering on routine. Even midday, when Shadow Milk is lazily floating about Pure Vanilla's head while he gardens, writes or reads, suddenly he'll feel himself being pulled down and given a chaste peck with absolutely no explanation given.

Pure Vanilla is the touchy-feely type, sure, and Shadow Milk doesn't exactly mind it – or he wouldn't, if Pure Vanilla didn't smile so strangely after doing so and refuse to elaborate when questioned.

Weird. Very weird.

Their connections are also more frequent; Pure Vanilla seems to have taken on the burden of initiating without his usual shyness. They're not melding together every night, but very close to it, and the newness of it all still feels... strange. Again, Shadow Milk doesn't really mind, is more than content to play along and sink back into bliss without having to be the one doing all the work around here for once – but even their connections are just a bit off themselves.

There's a couple of repeating memories that Shadow Milk's gotten used to; flashes of their time together in the Spire of Deceit had been especially prominent in the early days. While they're rarely pleasant, they are able to be soothed with gentle brushes and pulses of reassurance that seem to settle Pure Vanilla's heart before the dreams slip away. Nowadays it's more of their normal activities that flit through Shadow Milk's mind in scattered pieces; often there's a few fleeting glimpses of a past day enjoyed together or a peaceful moment that had felt particularly beautiful at the time.

All of this is normal, but the consistently resurfacing memory of their kiss is not.

It's hard to tell whose perspective it's from, always a blur and more about fevered emotions and feeling of touch than something tangible to view. Yet it's still constant, comes up every single connection to the point that Shadow Milk can no longer ignore it.

Shadow Milk may dress the part of a fool, but he's far from obtuse.

Pure Vanilla wants to kiss him again.

It's a rather obvious conclusion; Shadow Milk himself can't possibly be the one dwelling on it, so all blame must lie squarely in the hands of his companion. The realization of Pure Vanilla's desires is unsurprising upon closer inspection; Shadow Milk Cookie is... well, Shadow Milk Cookie. Handsome, charming, good-looking, and oh-so fiendishly clever. While they'd certainly had a... tumultuous past, Pure Vanilla's also made it abundantly clear he wants to move past that.

So, Pure Vanilla Cookie wants to kiss him. Flattering. Interesting.

Complicated.

The thought is something Shadow Milk toys with over the next few days, weighing on him even as he continues to idly spend his time in Pure Vanilla's presence. Each glance at the other is now weighted, appraising of each bright little smile and fond gaze that Pure Vanilla flashes his way. The other's bubbly giggles bring a curious perk to Shadow Milk's brow, a moment of analysis to store away for later.

The real question is what's to be done about it.

Shadow Milk can continue to ignore it; it's not really a problem to do so. Waking up in Pure Vanilla's firm arms is fine – really, having the other's face muffled in Shadow Milk's neck cuts down on the snoring quite well. Increased connections aren't actually a bad thing, leaving him pleasantly buzzing throughout the next day after a languid night of dizzying sensations. A few flashes of the kiss he'd initiated may be... revealing, but they're not upsetting. Perhaps they should be, but Shadow Milk is perfectly content continuing to lounge about and be spoiled beneath the other's attention if that's how Pure Vanilla wants to play it. He's happy with the way things are; no real need to push it further.

Still, the thought of what to do about it all remains on Shadow Milk's mind no matter how many times he tries to discard it. Perhaps it's because of all these behaviors coupled together that keep him musing upon it, day after day. It's clear his subconscious has no intent on letting him simply brush the matter under the rug without a clear, proper analysis first.

So, one morning after Pure Vanilla's left for a meeting, Shadow Milk pushes himself out of bed, rolls onto his side and promptly summons a whiteboard to the middle of the room. A marker appears in his hand; he uncaps it with his teeth, tapping his hand agitatedly on his knee as he considers the board before him.

Pros and cons lists may be rather simple tools, but he's always found them to be rather effective nonetheless.

Shadow Milk floats over to the board, scribbling out a side for each before leaning back and giving the blank space a sweeping gaze. Hm. To start with Pros, or Cons?

Cons seems easier.

Con – it's Pure Vanilla Cookie. That alone is enough to earn a notch on the board as Shadow Milk swipes the marker down, adding a small note to the side. A simple, but powerful argument.

Pro – it is Pure Vanilla Cookie. He's been... tolerable lately, clearly changing for the better if Shadow Milk isn't finding him so repulsive. There's been effort on his part, that much is clear, so Shadow Milk reluctantly adds a little tally to the Pro side with a sigh.

Back to cons. Con – it might encourage Pure Vanilla to push farther, and they're already skirting disaster as it is. Pure Vanilla's own allies are beginning to turn against him, to say nothing of the Beasts opinions if they find out. And the less said of Dark Enchantress Cookie, the better.

Pro – since when was Shadow Milk averse to disasters? The chaos any sort of open affection would cause would be delightful, has clearly already ruined Dark Cacao Cookie's day and would only serve to cement Shadow Milk's superiority. Burning Spice Cookie can rip off as many wings as he likes, Shadow Milk's got his other half of the Soul Jam at his beck and call.

Con – their past together remains a thorn in Shadow Milk's side. He can't undo any of their mistakes, can't force Pure Vanilla to embrace Deceit in full when the other seems this far gone down the path of Truth. As best as he's tried, Pure Vanilla's glimmering radiance seems to only have grown with each passing day.

Pro – Shadow Milk's already discarded his old self once. If he wanted to – and he's certainly not saying he is – he could... change. It's possible, not likely, but he's not immovable to reason. There's been no good reason thus given but still, he's always up for a debate.

Shadow Milk floats back, inspecting the board again; a scowl as he sees he's caught at dead even. Nothing made clear quite yet, but there's still a ways to go.

Cons, cons, cons... he has lots of those in mind, he's sure of it. Pure Vanilla Cookie himself is an easy target. Snores, doesn't take care of himself, can't dress to save his life – all of these are quickly jotted down on the board as Shadow Milk smirks to himself. What else, what else...?

Kind. Patient and gentle. Remarkably smooth when he wants to be. A pleasant source of warmth against Shadow Milk's dough, a tender touch to soothe his agitated mind.

Shadow Milk recoils, marker still in hand; he squints suspiciously at the board, eyes tracing uneasily over what he's just written. Hm. The Pro side looks a little too hefty now. He needs more Cons to even it out.

Con – Pure Vanilla-! Pure Vanilla...

Hm. Shadow Milk clicks his tongue, tapping the bottom of the marker to his chin. Pure Vanilla what? He's... annoying. Yes, that's right. Very annoying. Persistent. His forehead crinkles when he laughs.

Shadow Milk pauses, mentally ticking back through that last one. Is that a con? It feels like just an observation – yet where had it come from?

Regardless, now both sides are even again. Unhelpful.

Another sigh as Shadow Milk caps the marker. He folds both arms behind his head as he drifts backwards from the board. What to do, what to do? He can keep going, of course, but will it keep being in circles? It's hard to puzzle out a Cookie like Pure Vanilla, so intent on defying Shadow Milk's expectations.

It's just a kiss. It shouldn't be this complicated.

Perhaps Shadow Milk should consider his own feelings on the matter?

After a moment of hesitation, Shadow Milk closes his eyes, allowing his analytical mind to slow. He focuses on his core, on the pulsing of his Soul Jam at his chest as he plucks out the memory of that night, of Pure Vanilla's starstruck gaze and the feeling of warmth as he was clutched at, pressed into a desperate, hungry embrace-

Fire sings in Shadow Milk's jam; he abruptly snaps his eyes open, straightening rigidly as he shakes his head. No – none of that.

What a pointless exercise. This world is about what he can gain or lose by any single action, a game where there is always a winner standing above the rest – and that's exactly who Shadow Milk intends to be. If he does or doesn't kiss Pure Vanilla again, it will be because that is the proper move to play. If it's satisfactory. If it makes him happy.

He still doesn't know what to do, though.

Perhaps an experiment is needed. The thought is idle, yet pleasing as Shadow Milk ruminates on it a bit more. He's got his hypothesis, his what-ifs, but they're of little import without actual testing. Why make a hasty decision before he's able to poke and prod at the variables a little more?

Yes, some good old experimentation is in order. Shadow Milk smiles to himself as he dismisses the whiteboard with a flick of his wrist, chomping down on the marker between his teeth as it dissolves into sugar on his tongue. It's a fine idea – he's glad he's thought of it – and will certainly be able to put all his of internal quibbling to rest.

The only question left remaining is the stage to host it on.

--

"I'm still not quite clear on how to play this."

That evening finds the pair of them tucked back up – where else? – in Pure Vanilla's bedroom, resting comfortably around the small game table Shadow Milk'd summoned to the center of the room. Two chairs frame each side, with Shadow Milk hovering comfortably above his and Pure Vanilla bent over in thought across from him. The backgammon board laid out before them only has three moves made, yet Pure Vanilla seems to be taking his sweet time thinking out his moves.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes at the wait, leaning back in his chair with a dramatic sigh. "It really couldn't be simpler."

"I think it could." Pure Vanilla picks up the dice, rattling them around in his palm. "Why can't we just play chess again?"

"Playing the same game over and over is boring," Shadow Milk sighs. "You're still no match for me."

“Really?” Pure Vanilla gives him a once-over, look suddenly turning sly. “So this has nothing to do with how I got you in check last time?”

“Check is irrelevant,” Shadow Milk snaps back. “Checkmate is what matters. Don’t go getting cocky.”

“Yes, dear,” Pure Vanilla hums back; he rolls his dice on the board, oblivious to the narrowed stare Shadow Milk sends his way.

Another new little habit of his. Clearly meant to be in teasing jest, only ever used to end an argument – but still enough to draw Shadow Milk’s suspicious gaze.

With a sigh, Shadow Milk cranes his neck back, staring lazily out the open window as Pure Vanilla’s checkers audibly click across the board. The sun’s still setting, the first vestiges of night only just beginning to crawl their way across the horizon – but at least there’s no glimpse of the moon. For now.

Hm. The moon?

The thought of his longtime heckler rings a bell somewhere in the back of Shadow Milk’s mind. Honestly, hadn’t she played a part in why they’d started their games in the first place? Back at the beginning, when Shadow Milk was only a hair’s breadth away from crumbling Pure Vanilla on the spot instead of just contemplating throwing him out the window again. What was it that fool had always been going on about? A moon, a blue moon...

The Blue Moon Garden.

Shadow Milk tilts his head to the side, a considering lift to his brow. They’d never actually gone, had they? Pure Vanilla’d lost every game they’d ever played, and nowadays his pitiful pleas are but a fading memory. Yet, perhaps there’s some promise in the notion?

A fitting stage for his experiment. Why not? It’s not like Pure Vanilla will refuse to go.

The sound of a throat being cleared draws Shadow Milk’s attention back. “Your turn,” Pure Vanilla says politely.

“I’m bored,” Shadow Milk announces abruptly; with a flick of his wrist, the board is scattered across the floor. Pure Vanilla starts, a flash of annoyance on his face before Shadow Milk abruptly holds up a hand for silence. Shadow Milk then flips it over, holding out his palm; in the center, a shiny silver coin glints promisingly in the light. “Call it.”

“What?” Pure Vanilla glances between Shadow Milk and the coin. “Call – what?”

“Heads,” Shadow Milk replies slowly, “or tails? Call it.”

Pure Vanilla gives him an amused, yet distinctly unimpressed once-over. “I have learned better than to bet on *your* coins, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk scoffs in mock-offense. “Are you accusing me of cheating, Nilly?”

“If you did not cheat,” Pure Vanilla replies, a smile on his lips, “I would wonder who you are, and what you’ve done to my precious companion.”

Precious. Another new word, casually slipped in like it’s nothing at all.

“Fine.” Shadow Milk flicks the coin over to Pure Vanilla, hitting him squarely in the chest before it drops to the table. “You flip it, then.”

Pure Vanilla’s gaze is wary, yet still tinged with vague amusement as he reaches to pick up the coin. “May I ask why the sudden interest?”

“Stakes!” Shadow Milk summons his cane to his palm, twirling it for effect. “Games are boring me tonight! I want stakes. Action. Chaos. Getting out of this cramped little room you’ve got me locked away in for your own selfish desires.”

“We could go for a walk,” Pure Vanilla replies mildly.

“Stakes!” Shadow Milk taps his cane firmly on the table. “Go on, flip it.”

“Hold on.” Pure Vanilla shakes his head. “You haven’t said what the stakes are.”

“It’s a surprise.”

Pure Vanilla’s brow immediately arches. “That sounds extremely dangerous, coming from you.”

“Flatterer,” Shadow Milk purrs back. He then offers a simple smile and dismissive wave of his hand. “Hurry up and flip it. I’m crumbling of your old age over here.”

A sigh follows, but surprisingly, Pure Vanilla acquiesces. The coin is flipped upwards; as it spins in mid-air, Pure Vanilla calls out: “Heads.”

The coin clatters down on the table, spinning twice before abruptly falling over on its side.

Tails.

Shadow Milk gives the coin an amused once-over before glancing up at Pure Vanilla; the other simply shrugs his shoulders in defeat. “Oh well. What do I lose this time?”

“Nah,” Shadow Milk drawls; he leans back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head. “You can go again.”

Pure Vanilla blinks, open surprise in his expression. “Really?”

“Sure.” Shadow Milk grins, all teeth. “Call it a pity throw. You’re just *so* bad at this.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to be *bad* at a game of chance,” Pure Vanilla hums back, but he picks up the coin and tosses it back up in the air. Another set of spins before it comes hurtling down –

Tails. Again.

Shadow Milk snorts. “Bad at this.”

Pure Vanilla gives him a look but Shadow Milk simply waves his hand again, a sign to continue. After a moment’s hesitation, Pure Vanilla grabs the coin and throws it again.

Tails. Tails. Another Tails; they’re both laughing openly now as they stare down at the coin. “Seriously?” Shadow Milk snickers; Pure Vanilla’s muffling his own giggle in the sleeve of his robe.

“I’m sorry!” Pure Vanilla’s eyes are crinkled with mirth, shaking his head back and forth. “I’m sorry, I don’t-” Another giggle.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes fondly, reaching over and snatching the coin from the table. He gives Pure Vanilla a long look, matching the other’s amused smile before flicking the coin into the air. A few twists before there’s a loud clatter on the table as the coin bounces and spins and spins, over and over in tight little circles-

Before coming to a complete standstill perfectly balanced on its side.

Shadow Milk stares in open disbelief; Pure Vanilla has doubled over in his chair, both hands clapped over his mouth to muffle his peals of laughter. A wry grin twitches on Shadow Milk’s lips as he glances between the coin and the other, still visibly shaking from his unrestrained giggling. With another roll of his eyes, Shadow Milk reaches out and pushes the coin over.

Heads.

“There,” Shadow Milk says, grinning as Pure Vanilla’s giggles continue to fill the air. “Was that so hard?”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla’s taking in a breath, fluttering a hand at his chest as he tries to compose himself while still wearing that same, shining smile. “Oh! Have I won?”

“Yes. Against *all* odds, it seems.” Shadow Milk gives him an amused smirk. “Congratulations. First time for everything.”

Another fluttery giggle. “I see. And what have I won?”

“Well...” Shadow Milk tilts his head, pretending to consider. “I suppose we could do that thing you were always badgering me about.”

“Being nice to the staff?”

“No.” Shadow Milk motions to the window. “Wasn’t there some garden you were going on and on and on about?” A careless shrug. “What was it called again?”

A flicker of thoughtfulness crosses Pure Vanilla’s face before his expression suddenly brightens. “Oh!” His hands clap together. “Oh, the Blue Moon Garden!” A blink. “Goodness.

I'd forgotten all about that."

"Me too." Shadow Milk pushes himself out from his chair, floating higher. "But! If that's what the victor wants, who am I to object? You did win, after all."

"I did win." Pure Vanilla's smiling at him, eyes fond – so openly, unapologetically fond. For some reason the image sends a strange shiver down Shadow Milk's dough – no. He steels himself, closing his eyes momentarily. Not the time. This is an experiment. Focus.

"Shadow Milk?" A touch of concern. "Are you alright?"

Shadow Milk's eyes snap open; instantly he places a smile on his face, dipping into a bow with extravagant flourish. "Of course! Only contemplating such a devastating loss. Perhaps you've been the one cheating all along, hm?" Shadow Milk reaches out, grasping Pure Vanilla's hand in his own; there's another giggle, that same fondness that Shadow Milk refuses to bend to as he leans in and asks:

"So! Where to, Dollface?"

--

It turns out the location of the Blue Moon garden isn't terribly far.

Shadow Milk had expected some long, epic trip the way Pure Vanilla had been building up to it; in the end, it's only a short flight down from the Vanilla Kingdom itself. While leading Pure Vanilla all the way there hadn't been ideal for time's sake, the other had seemed a little hesitant about Shadow Milk's portals and all too delighted to be magicked up into the air alongside him once more. The other's gasps of delight as they'd soared through the night sky had been – amusing, and the warmth of his hand in Shadow Milk's own had kept the chill away, at least.

Irrelevant to the data he's collecting, but a nice little side-observation nonetheless.

When they finally touch down, it's in a meadow that Shadow Milk's actually passed through before. He'd barely given the place a second glance, just another field of flowers on his journey through the kingdom; he supposes, on closer inspection, that they are *moonflowers* – but they're still fairly unremarkable all things considered.

As he sets Pure Vanilla on the grass, the other beams at him before his staff excitedly sweeps over the area. "Oh! How lovely." The flowers sway gently in the breeze, a rippling sea of white that gleams as Pure Vanilla casts his staff's light upon them. "Look! That one's got a fresh bud."

"Yes, yes," Shadow Milk sighs; he tries to let go of Pure Vanilla's hand but the other is still clasping tight, turning this way and that as he smiles at the meadow. Ugh. Florists. "Nilly, they're just flowers. You have tons of these at home."

“Oh, but not like these.” Pure Vanilla bends down – finally, he lets go of Shadow Milk’s hand, if only to lovingly caress the petals of the nearest flower. “White Lily Cookie says these are special.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Oh, well if *White Lily Cookie* says.”

“I know you have your reasons for disliking her,” Pure Vanilla says gently, “but she really is quite knowledgeable. I’ve been writing to her-”

“Don’t care,” Shadow Milk interrupts; he doesn’t want to hear it. He casts an unimpressed gaze over the field, shrugging his shoulders. “Anyway, I’ve seen better. Much better.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla glances up. “Where?”

“Around.” Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder. “Beast Yeast’s flora comes to mind. The Bleeding Hearts in Eternal Sugar Cookie’s neck of the woods were always impressive. Mystic Flour cultivated some Jade Vines back in the day that really brightened up a room.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Pure Vanilla smiles up at him. “Will you show me someday?”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk averts his eyes. “They’ll crumble you first.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Pure Vanilla’s settling down in the grass, carefully tucking his feet under him. “I’m quite happy here, in any case.”

“But it’s boring.” Shadow Milk lolls his head to the side, sighing in exasperation at his surroundings. “Honestly, the way you kept asking, I really expected something more out of this place.”

“Oh, well, there is.”

Shadow Milk glances down, perking a brow.

“You see,” Pure Vanilla continues, gently bracing a leaf in his palm, “once every three years, the Vanilla Kingdom is blessed with a blue moon – granted, I’m sure other places see it too, but I’ve only experienced it here. Instead of gracing us with her white light, for one night the moon glows in a beautiful cerulean hue. It’s said to be in celebration of the sea and their love for one another.”

“Gross,” Shadow Milk remarks idly.

Pure Vanilla chuckles before adding: “But, it is only one night. It’s quite rare. White Lily Cookie happened to come across this field during such an event, and told me that these flowers glow blue under the moon’s special light. So, she named it the Blue Moon Garden. I’ve wanted to come here on such a night ever since she told me.”

Shadow Milk glances up at the sky. “Hate to break it to you Nilly, but the moon’s as plain as ever tonight.”

“Well...” Pure Vanilla’s tone is surprisingly sly. “Is that... something you could change?”

A blink as Shadow Milk lowers his gaze down. “Huh?”

Pure Vanilla toys with a blade of grass, a small smile on his lips. “I was just curious,” he replies easily, “if a master of illusions might be able to show me what it’s like?”

A beat of silence; Shadow Milk’s lips twitch into a smirk as he looks the other up and down. “Let me get this straight,” he drawls. “When you were asking for this trip, way back at the start – this was your intention.”

A shy grin. “Maybe.”

“How bold.” Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his back, leaning in to hover face-to-face. “You want me to move heaven and Earthbread for you, Nilly?”

A pretty little bat of Pure Vanilla’s eyes; Shadow Milk has no idea if it’s intentional or not, but the sight makes his jam sing in reply. “Please?”

Well. Shadow Milk’s not made of stone.

He heaves a dramatic sigh, shaking his head as he floats backwards. “Oh, Nilly. You really are *so* high maintenance.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, directing his gaze skywards. A quick flourish of his cane as he points it at the moon; his eyes narrow as power swells in his palm, feeling the tendrils of reality bending to his command.

The sky bleeds black, drowning out the stars in an inky abyss as darkness spreads across the horizon. The moon shivers as Shadow Milk drapes a curtain of sapphire across her, leaving her once brilliant radiance faded into a softer, gentler blue. It’s an illusion, nothing more, but a quick glance back at Pure Vanilla’s sparkling eyes tells him it’s an effective one.

Less importantly, the moonflowers seem to have taken notice themselves. The once milky-white petals are shimmering beneath the new moon’s glow, pearlescence now tinged a dusky blue. Pure Vanilla lets out a delighted gasp, pushing himself to his feet as he turns this way and that – his robe twirls as he takes in the shimmering field surrounding them, each flower a radiant jewel that gleams proudly beneath Shadow Milk’s tender illusion.

It is, admittedly, a rather lovely sight; perhaps made lovelier by Pure Vanilla’s bright, shining smile as he takes it all in. The other’s enthusiasm feels infectious, drawing an amused smile of Shadow Milk’s own as he floats back down, watching Pure Vanilla excitedly step through the field and openly marvel at the sights.

“Oh,” Pure Vanilla sighs happily, hands coming up to clutch at his chest. “It’s beautiful.”

“So high maintenance,” Shadow Milk drawls back, twisting in the air to hover at Pure Vanilla’s side. “Yet oh-so simple to please.”

Pure Vanilla beams up at him, gaze so heavy and fond. He lifts a hand; Shadow Milk closes his eyes, instinctively leaning into the touch as the hand caresses his cheek. “Thank you, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk hums back; when he languidly cracks his eyes open once more, Pure Vanilla is still smiling at him, still tenderly brushing his hand over Shadow Milk's cheek.

They're close. Shadow Milk feels strangely floaty, a distant acknowledgment of the warmth in his jam feeling more and more muddled by each inhale of that soft vanilla scent. It'd be easy to simply close the distance, to test the hypothesis that had brought him out here in the first place. Pure Vanilla's gentle gaze is openly inviting, no trace of a refusal in his smile.

Yet it feels different from before. There's no background murmurs of partygoers, no jealous admirer glaring at them from behind closed curtains. Shadow Milk lacks the fine draperies of Lady Milk Crown Cookie to shield himself from whatever may happen next. If Shadow Milk gives in, if he leans forward to press his lips to Pure Vanilla's once more –

An experiment. It's an experiment, nothing more, nothing – else.

Is it?

A sudden spark of anxiousness twists in his chest; before he realizes, Shadow Milk is recoiling, sharply pulling himself from Pure Vanilla's grasp. The other blinks in surprise, a querying look that Shadow Milk quickly averts his eyes from as he turns away.

“What's wrong?”

“Oh,” Shadow Milk sighs dramatically, allowing the fluttering, nervous feeling in his chest add additional flourish to his tone. “Oh, I just can't make up my mind! What to do, what to do!” He floats higher, out of any sneakily grasping reach, hands clasped behind his back. “Really, you're making this *so* difficult.”

“Am I?” Pure Vanilla's tone is polite, yet curious. “And what am I troubling you with, I wonder?”

“I told you, I'm still making up my mind.” Shadow Milk keeps his face turned away, rocking back and forth in the air on his heels. “Not an easy decision, mind you. It feels oh-so precarious to indulge you, Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“Ah.” Amusement, plain as day. “May I ask what sort of *indulgence* you're considering?”

“No.” Instant, perhaps a bit too petulant for Shadow Milk's liking. “It's none of your business.”

A hum in reply; Shadow Milk can hear the grass shift, as if Pure Vanilla's taking a step closer. “Are you sure? Perhaps I could help make up your mind.”

Shadow Milk casts a coy glance over his shoulder, down to the other looking back at him. “Maybe,” he says after a moment. “In what way?”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla replies easily, “you've always enjoyed debates. Why don't we each argue a side of your... indecision?”

Hm. That's a thought.

Shadow Milk leans forward, propping up his chin with one hand. "I don't know," he drawls. "I've already made a Pros and Cons list. It didn't get me very far."

"Really." Pure Vanilla gives him a sweeping gaze, a sly smile on his lips. "I would have liked to see this list."

"You wouldn't." Shadow Milk flutters his lashes. "I was mean."

"I don't doubt it." Pure Vanilla offers a hand up with a beckoning motion; begrudgingly, Shadow Milk floats back down to his level, arms crossing over his chest. "So," Pure Vanilla continues, perking a brow, "which side would you like to take?"

Shadow Milk scoffs. "You don't even know what we're debating."

"I have a feeling," Pure Vanilla replies easily, "that I'll figure it out as we go."

"Hmph." Shadow Milk allows a grin of his own. "So *cocky*! A point against you, and we haven't even started."

"Oh dear. I suppose I'll have to do better, then." Pure Vanilla cocks his head. "So, which side-?"

"I'll argue against," Shadow Milk decides. "You can argue for."

"Alright." Pure Vanilla gives him another amused look. "As the affirmative side, shall I start?"

"Yes. But make it quick." Shadow Milk leans back to rest in mid-air, gaze lazily tracing over the other. "A few sentences. A snappy back-and-forth."

"Hm." Pure Vanilla's expression is thoughtful, still largely amused before he replies. "Well. I'll suppose I'll start by arguing that if it's something you're considering one way or another, it's something you want to do. After all, you never do any less than what you please."

"I'm not wholly opposed to the idea," Shadow Milk hums back. "But that's a rather obvious statement in the first place. There are plenty of things I want to do, but there are always consequences to any action, silly old fool."

"I see. May I ask if you know what those consequences are?"

Shadow Milk casually raises his eyes skyward. "Not entirely. Which is what complicates the matter. Frankly, doing nothing at all nets me zero of these consequences, which is what I'm leaning towards."

"Oh?" Pure Vanilla's smile is back. "I did not consider you a Cookie of inaction. Is that not against your character, to play avoiding risk?"

Ooh. This draws a narrowing of Shadow Milk's eyes, lowering his attention back down as Pure Vanilla looks him over.

“I think,” Pure Vanilla says serenely, “that is a point for me.”

“I do not play avoiding *risk*,” Shadow Milk snaps, straightening up in mid-air. “I play to win. Whatever move I make, it is to suit my purposes.”

“Are you truly winning if you can’t do as you wish?” Pure Vanilla takes another step forward, openly ignoring Shadow Milk’s scowl. “Clearly it’s something you desire if you’re willing to argue it out.”

“It’s not *my* desires,” Shadow Milk retorts hotly. “It’s *yours*.”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “Mine?”

Shadow Milk glowers down at him; a brief moment of hesitation before he venomously spits: “*You* want to kiss me.”

Silence. It stretches on for a long time, long enough for Shadow Milk to embarrassedly avert his eyes from Pure Vanilla’s stunned expression. He puts his back to the other, folding his arms across his chest as he stubbornly stares on the moon glimmering cheekily back at him. Even clad in his perfect blue, she mocks him.

Annoying. This whole trip is annoying.

Worse, there’s the sound of a giggle behind him. Shadow Milk instantly whirls around, feeling an angry flush to his face – only to see Pure Vanilla hiding his face in the sleeve of his robe, chuckling to himself as if Shadow Milk wouldn’t notice, as if Shadow Milk’s not right there.

“Stop it,” Shadow Milk snaps, the heat in his cheeks flaring further. “You little pest. You think this is funny?”

“I do,” Pure Vanilla chuckles, lifting his gaze with a fond smile. “But only because it’s you.”

“Shut *up*.” Shadow Milk’s words come out as a hiss, grip on his arms tightening.

“Bothersome little gnat. The answer’s *no*, by the way. So thank you ever so much for helping me decide to never humor you again.”

Pure Vanilla huffs a soft laugh, his eyes crinkling as he takes another step forward; he reaches out, offering a hand that Shadow Milk pointedly refuses. “Oh, but you can’t decide yet,” Pure Vanilla replies, smile unabated. “I’ve only just learned what I’m arguing for, and on a topic I’ve taken quite an interest in no less.”

“Don’t care,” Shadow Milk sneers back. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” Pure Vanilla hums back, soft and teasing. “I’d like to state my case, if you’ll hear it.”

“I won’t.” Shadow Milk turns away, putting his back to the other. “Prattle on all you like. It won’t make a difference.”

“Then prattle on I shall.” The audible swish of Pure Vanilla’s robes betrays him; as he takes a step to Shadow Milk’s side, Shadow Milk stubbornly turns the other way to avoid him. Another chuckle, before Pure Vanilla remarks: “I enjoyed kissing you.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. Obviously.

“I,” Pure Vanilla continues, taking another step that Shadow Milk twists to avoid, “think you enjoyed kissing me too. I think you wouldn’t be considering doing it again if you hadn’t.”

Drivel. Pure Vanilla’s the one dwelling on this, infecting their dreamscape with this... obsession of his. Shadow Milk isn’t affected at all; this heat in his cheeks is fury, nothing more.

A hand reaches up; Shadow Milk swiftly jerks his head away, floating several feet back. Pure Vanilla, infuriatingly, chuckles again.

“You’re so shy.”

This, oh, this makes Shadow Milk whirl around, disbelief and white-hot anger flaring with in a dizzying rush. He lunges for Pure Vanilla, grabbing him by the collar as he yanks the other in close, baring his teeth. “*You*,” he hisses, “have done *enough* talking.”

“No, I haven’t.” Pure Vanilla is revoltingly unaffected, still smiling even with Shadow Milk’s snarl inches from his face. “You haven’t kissed me yet.”

Shadow Milk’s face twists in disgust, shoving Pure Vanilla backwards; the other stumbles a bit, but his smile is unflinching. “I,” Shadow Milk declares furiously, “am *not* kissing you.”

Pure Vanilla cocks his head. “Are you sure?”

“I am sure.” Shadow Milk folds his arms back across his chest, glare furious and stubborn. “I’m not kissing you.”

“What a shame.” Pure Vanilla’s own gaze slides downwards, a casual shrug of his shoulders. “I suppose I’ll have to find someone else to kiss me, then.”

Shadow Milk... isn’t entirely sure what happens after that.

The sky darkens; he knows this because every scrap of light is blotted out around him, save for the shining beacon that is Pure Vanilla’s staff. It, somehow, lies several feet away, knocked to the side and laying amongst the flowers instead of gripped in the hand of its owner. An owner that now lies flat on his back in the grass, arms pinned down by the wrist while Shadow Milk –

Well. Shadow Milk is the one pinning him down.

There is a fleeting, unnerving thought that Shadow Milk has no idea what he looks like right now. He’s distantly aware of the shadows pouring off his form, of how his hair is lifting and writhing like furious snakes as every one of his eyes lock onto Pure Vanilla beneath him.

Pure Vanilla own expression is one of shock, eyes wide as he stares up into Shadow Milk's wild, unknowable expression.

Is he frightened? He should be. Shadow Milk's breaths are coming too quick for his own liking, a cold and terrible feeling numbing his limbs. He's not sure how they got there. He's not sure why he's holding Pure Vanilla down, why the other isn't shoving him off, flinching away, refusing his touch.

He's also not sure why Pure Vanilla's look of surprise is melting away into something soft and openly, unapologetically fond.

"Ah," Pure Vanilla sighs, "my apologies. I should not have played upon your jealousies."

Jealousies? What jealousies? And why isn't he afraid? Shadow Milk is looming menacingly, more shadow than Cookie, yet Pure Vanilla lies here unaffected? Where had all the fear, the terror of him gone? Why is Pure Vanilla smiling up without hesitance?

A hand slips from his grasp, reaching up to touch his cheek; Shadow Milk's flinches, but it does not draw away. "I do not know," Pure Vanilla murmurs softly, "what consequences you have imagined, or what fear stills your hand. But you do not need to rush such things. I will be here when you are ready, Shadow Milk Cookie."

Ready?

Pure Vanilla's hand drops as he lets out a low, contented sigh. "Thank you for the garden. I had a wonderful time." A small smile. "Shall we head home?"

Home.

Shadow Milk's lips curl in a sneer. "We're not done here."

Pure Vanilla's head lolls to the side. "We're not?"

"I," Shadow Milk hisses, "am not afraid of *you*, or the Ancients, or the Witches themselves. I am not afraid of your pitiful consequences. If I want to kiss you, I *will*."

A soft hum, eyes lidding. "And?" Pure Vanilla murmurs back. "Do you want to kiss me?"

"I don't know."

It's immediate and honest, revoltingly so. The most honest thing he's said all night. Nauseating. Dizzying.

Pure Vanilla's smile softens. "It's alright. As I said, I will be here when you're ready." His eyes close as he continues: "If you'd like, for dinner we could- *mmph!*"

Whatever nonsense Pure Vanilla had been about to say is lost, because Shadow Milk is yanking him up into a fierce, furious kiss.

It's certainly different from their first, yet still familiar in how Pure Vanilla stills in surprise. Shadow Milk pulls him closer, angrily nipping at the other's lip to get him to move; only to feel Pure Vanilla's arms start to encircle him as the other begins hungrily kissing him back. Hands sliding over Shadow Milk's back, gripping in his hair, deepening the kiss as a breath is gasped between them –

Before Shadow Milk abruptly plants his hands on Pure Vanilla's chest, shoving the other back down and breaking the kiss with a sharp hiss.

Pure Vanilla stares vacantly upwards as Shadow Milk glowers down at him; there are no words exchanged before Shadow Milk pushes himself upwards, floating high into the air as he continues pinning Pure Vanilla with his glare.

When the other reaches out, mouth opening in question, Shadow Milk immediately turns and zips away, soaring high above the treetops to vanish from the other's sight. His heart is a drumbeat in his chest, his Soul Jam singing in both jubilation and annoyance in perfect tandem – Shadow Milk ignores it all, schooling his scowl as he folds his arms across his chest.

That little pest can walk home tonight.

Chapter 20

Shadow Milk may be many things, but he isn't a monster.

Well, technically he is, but he's a practical monster. Despite his dramatic exit and the annoyance still simmering in his jam, he knows he can't *actually* leave Pure Vanilla alone in the woods. The other may be a capable magic user, but he's still blind as a bat and liable to wander off a cliff or into the jaws of some Cake Hound if Shadow Milk simply abandons him to the night. And, regrettably, if Pure Vanilla gets his arm bitten off, Shadow Milk's going to be feeling that one in the morning as well.

So, he waits. Not where Pure Vanilla can see him, high and far enough away to be mutually tucked out of sight. Shadow Milk dozes amongst the treetops, floating peacefully beneath the star-studded sky now that his illusion's finally worn off. There's nothing to disturb him but the gentle caress of the wind on his dough and the rustling of the leaves below.

Shadow Milk waits nearly an hour – when there are no warning signs of teeth marks imprinting in his dough, he decides the other's probably had enough of bumbling about and heads back down to the meadow.

Upon his descent, Shadow Milk is appalled to find Pure Vanilla sitting just where he'd left him, hands tucked into his lap and a serene smile on his face.

Pure Vanilla, content as can be, simply just... waiting for him.

Infuriating. So infuriating that Shadow Milk is before him in an instant, grabbing Pure Vanilla by the collar as he leans in to scowl in the other's face. "You," Shadow Milk hisses through gritted teeth, "are the most *annoying* Cookie in all of Earthbread."

The grin Pure Vanilla flashes back in return has Shadow Milk's jam boiling; before the other can say a single, no doubt equally-infuriating word, Shadow Milk's yanking him into yet another kiss.

He doesn't care anymore. Anything to shut this little pest up.

It works, sort of – Pure Vanilla is immediately far more interested in kissing than talking, grasping hands pulling Shadow Milk closer in an instant. There's a gentle squeeze on Shadow Milk's hips followed by, of all things, a revolting little giggle. The fact that Pure Vanilla is clearly oh-so pleased with himself sends another spike of fury through Shadow Milk's jam; he nips admonishingly at Pure Vanilla's lower lip in an attempt to punish, but all he gets back is a happy sigh in return.

Annoying. So, so annoying.

It's a bit of a blur from there, all movement and wandering hands that grab and caress with reckless abandon. Somewhere between the kissing and greedy, open-mouthed gasps, Pure Vanilla's managed to flip them, pinning Shadow Milk beneath him in the grass. Shadow Milk

takes offense to this, pushing upwards – only to find his own wrists trapped in Pure Vanilla’s grasp and a sly little grin on the other’s face. A flicker of disbelief, a pulse of something dangerous as their Soul Jams hover just shy of brushing before Pure Vanilla’s leaning in to press another kiss to Shadow Milk’s slack, gawking mouth.

Shadow Milk may have underestimated this old fool.

That fleeting thought feels more and more apparent every time Shadow Milk comes up for air, because the moment Shadow Milk turns his head away Pure Vanilla’s immediately busying himself trailing kisses up the curve of Shadow Milk’s neck. No gentle swatting or biting remarks seems to dissuade him; if anything, he seems to take it as an invitation. Clearly, he’s under the belief that if Shadow Milk has enough breath to complain, he has enough breath to be kissed again.

This – misconception follows them all the way back home. Even after Shadow Milk’s managed to pry Pure Vanilla off him long enough to fly them back to the castle, the moment Pure Vanilla’s feet touch his bedroom floor he’s pulling Shadow Milk over to the bed. He falls backwards with an open laugh; Shadow Milk groans as he’s tugged down after, wrapped up in Pure Vanilla’s arms with his back pressed against the other’s chest as kisses are continually peppered against his cheek.

“Aren’t you tired?” Shadow Milk complains, giving Pure Vanilla a firm nudge with his elbow. “You’re so clingy.”

Pure Vanilla simply hums, burying his face against Shadow Milk’s neck. “That depends,” he murmurs, the vibrations sending an unbidden shiver through Shadow Milk’s dough. “Will you still let me kiss you in the morning?”

“Ugh.” Shadow Milk gives him another nudge. “Why should I? Seriously Nilly, you’re so annoying.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla hums, “or no?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, slumping limply in Pure Vanilla’s arms in a show of petulance. “I don’t care. You’re insufferable either way.”

“Yes?” It’s a prompt, accompanied by a sickeningly gentle nuzzle.

“Oh, for- yes, yes, fine!” Shadow Milk hisses, cheeks flushed with what can only be exasperation. “Now *let go*.”

Pure Vanilla finally acquiesces, releasing his grip with another soft laugh. Shadow Milk is mercifully left to his own side of the bed, is allowed to mutter and burrow under the covers without greedy hands grasping at his dough. As Pure Vanilla settles in himself, he leans over to whisper a sweet little murmur in Shadow Milk’s ear, a hushed goodnight that Shadow Milk merely hisses to in reply. The lights go out and, after quite a bit of tossing and turning, Shadow Milk finally sinks into restless, fitful sleep.

When Shadow Milk begrudgingly wakes to the sun's merciless rays on his face, he is wholly unsurprised to find Pure Vanilla wrapped up around him yet again, and smiling in his sleep. As Shadow Milk sighs to himself, exhaustedly slumping back into the embrace and massaging at his temple, a persistent thought echoes at the forefront of his mind.

He *really* should have just let this old fool spend the night in the woods.

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Surprisingly, nothing really changes after that.

Shadow Milk had half expected some grand gesture, to be woken with more nuzzles and greedy little kisses pressed into his dough each day; instead, Pure Vanilla seems perfectly content to resume their normal activities as if nothing had happened at all. Sure, there's still the relatively-new good morning kiss, but that's always pressed to Shadow Milk's cheek, not lips. Beyond that, everything's as it was – Pure Vanilla is dragged out of bed by the sisters, brushed and prepped for the day, then ushered out the door to his meetings. When he returns at night, if Shadow Milk's left him alone for the day, not much else passes beyond their usual games and chats before both retire to bed.

It's as if Pure Vanilla's backed off completely, and Shadow Milk's not really sure he likes that outcome either.

While the side Pure Vanilla had shown in the garden had certainly been a bit much, receiving the same serene smile as he always has feels irritating in a way he can't place. It's a difficult thing to put into words, to be both relieved at the space to breathe and still nettled by the sudden lack of appropriate attention. He's Shadow Milk Cookie; if Pure Vanilla's going to kiss him, he better commit.

So, Shadow Milk decides to do what he does best – ask questions.

“Why did you even bother asking?”

Pure Vanilla glances up; they're both seated around the game table, but there's no board laid out this time. Instead, Pure Vanilla's got his head bent over a newspaper, mug of tea in hand, while Shadow Milk toys with floating his own cup in circles overhead. “Pardon?” Pure Vanilla says after a moment.

“You asked me,” Shadow Milk says lazily, eyes on his cup, “if you could kiss me in the morning. And yet it's been nearly a week, and you haven't done a single thing. Have you gone senile enough to forget already, old fool?”

“Ah.” Pure Vanilla sets his mug down, a small smile on his face. “No, I haven't forgotten.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow, a clear sign to continue.

Pure Vanilla folds the newspaper, moving it to the side before he continues: “I did not wish to rush into things and upset you.” The smile deepens, just a bit. “I get the feeling you don’t like being openly pursued. I also feel I may have gotten a little carried away in my enthusiasm that night.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Shadow Milk drawls, finally lowering his gaze to the other. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to be the Beast around here.”

A laugh, accompanied by a slight flush to Pure Vanilla’s cheeks. “My apologies. I was... very touched by your return.”

“Funny. As I remember it, I was the one who was *very touched*.”

Pure Vanilla’s flush deepens to a lovely pink as he quickly averts his eyes; there’s another laugh, but this one feels a bit nervous. “As I said – my apologies.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, an amused smirk of his own twitching at the corner of his lips. “Oh, stop blushing like a schoolgirl. After all, it is *me*. Can I truly blame you?” An exaggerated sigh, a theatrical flick of his wrist. “Oh, the woes that come with being as magnificent as I.”

“Yes, well,” Pure Vanilla hums, re-opening his newspaper. “There’s your answer.” And just like that, he’s back to reading – though very obviously, hiding his still-pink cheeks in the folds of the paper.

“Nilly.”

A quick glance up before Pure Vanilla looks away again in clear embarrassment.

Shadow Milk gives the other an amused once-over. “Nilly,” he repeats slowly. “Are you ever going to kiss me again?”

Pure Vanilla’s newspaper is immediately set down again. “Do you want me to?”

A hum as Shadow Milk tilts his head, pretending to consider. “I’m not opposed,” he remarks after a moment, “to humoring you. If we iron out some rules first.”

The chair scoots as Pure Vanilla straightens up, hands folding in front of him. His earlier shyness has vanished, all attention on Shadow Milk. “Such as?”

Shadow Milk’s gaze lids dangerously. “You,” he says slowly, “are not to kiss other Cookies.”

Pure Vanilla lofts a brow, but seems otherwise unaffected. “I hadn’t planned on it,” he replies after a moment. “But I shall return the same restriction to you.”

“Oh, please.” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes again. “What would I bother with that for? It’s trouble enough just dealing with you.”

“Very well.” Pure Vanilla’s got a pleased little smile, even if his eyes remain serious. “What else?”

Shadow Milk toys with the hem of his sleeve, idly tugging on a thread before replying: "Don't pursue me." He pulls out the thread, laying it flat in his palm as he avoids Pure Vanilla's gaze. "I don't like it. I'll come find you when I want to."

"Alright." A pause. "Did I make you uncomfortable before?"

A shrug as Shadow Milk drops the thread on the table; it vanishes in a puff of smoke. "I don't enjoy feeling trapped." A slow, steady blink. "Physically or otherwise."

"My apologies," Pure Vanilla says gently. "I will keep this in mind."

Shadow Milk sighs, rolling his shoulders. "Stop apologizing. You're so annoying, you know that?"

"I do. You've mentioned it." Pure Vanilla's eyes are fond, completely unoffended. "Anything else?"

"Mmm..." Shadow Milk taps his foot against the table leg as he thinks. Ah. Here's a good one. "I get to kiss you too. Whenever I want, in front of whomever I want."

"No."

Shadow Milk blinks; Pure Vanilla's still smiling back at him, but his tone had been shockingly absolute. "No?" Shadow Milk repeats in disbelief.

"You may kiss me when I want it, and when it is appropriate." Pure Vanilla's gaze is deeply amused. "Don't think I don't know what you're planning. If you intend to weaponize kissing me just to make other Cookies uncomfortable, I am not interested."

A faux-gasp as Shadow Milk recoils dramatically in his chair. "Such accusations! Why, the thought never even crossed my mind."

"You did it to Dark Cacao Cookie."

Shadow Milk blinks. "You noticed that? You never said anything."

Pure Vanilla shrugs one shoulder, eyes lidded. "I liked the attention."

Well, well, well. Pure Vanilla Cookie, just full of surprises.

"But," Pure Vanilla continues, leaning back in his chair. "I'm not going to be as lenient about this. Your intentions may have been to cause him unease, but I allowed it since they would ultimately become a source of reassurance. Still, I'm not a fan of feeling used for the sake of it, and I won't welcome it again. So, please do not kiss me in front of the delegates simply to make a scene."

"I might," Shadow Milk retorts, just to be contrary. "I could flop right down in your lap, kiss you in front of all those doddering old farts and their horror-stricken faces. What would you do, hm?"

“I,” Pure Vanilla says with a smile, “would do something you would not like.”

A challenge. Shadow Milk scoots up in his seat, interest piqued. “Oh?” he replies with a grin. “And what’s that, my foolish, simple Nilly?”

Pure Vanilla clears his throat; a hand comes up to touch his chest as his shoulders sag in a sigh. “My friends,” he announces, voice ringing clear. “Please, do forgive my guest. I’m afraid Shadow Milk Cookie is so helplessly enamored with me that he cannot control himself. So deep is his longing, that even one moment apart-”

Shadow Milk’s hand snaps out, shoving Pure Vanilla back with a burst of magic; the other simply laughs, teetering dangerously in his chair before he regains his balance. “You see?” Pure Vanilla grins. “You would not like it.”

“Shut up,” Shadow Milk hisses back; he’s half-annoyed, half-impressed with the play.

“My rule,” Pure Vanilla replies calmly, “is that you may kiss me only because you, Shadow Milk Cookie, want to. I will accept no other reason than that.”

Shadow Milk scoffs. “Who says I want to?”

“You. And only you.” Pure Vanilla pushes himself up out of his seat, leaning on his staff as he makes his way to the other side of the table. He pauses before Shadow Milk, extending a hand in offer with a small smile. “Now then. Are these terms acceptable?”

Another scoff as Shadow Milk eyes the offered hand. “What is this, a contract?”

“A gentleman’s agreement.” Pure Vanilla keeps his hand held out, smile softening. “A show of mutual care.”

Shadow Milk sighs; after a moment he takes the offered hand, letting Pure Vanilla gently pull him closer as their foreheads brush. “You’re a lot of effort,” he grumbles.

“Oh, the feeling is mutual, my dear.” Pure Vanilla nuzzles against him gently. “But, remarkably worth it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

No curls at the tip of Shadow Milk’s tongue, but he doesn’t voice it. Instead, he simply mutters: “You’re not even that good at kissing.”

“How disappointing.” Pure Vanilla’s smile turns sly. “Perhaps you’d be open to helping me practice, then?”

This earns an ugly snort as Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Insufferable.”

“Actually,” Pure Vanilla remarks, pulling back as sudden interest sparks in his gaze. “You’ve reminded me. I have something else I wanted to ask.”

Shadow Milk cocks a brow. “Oh? How to not be so insufferable?”

“No, you’d be a terrible teacher for that. What I meant,” Pure Vanilla continues, ignoring Shadow Milk’s affronted gasp, “is that I’d like to learn some magic from you. Being left alone in the forest got me a little curious.”

Biting remark aside, he’s managed to pique Shadow Milk’s interest. “Curious about what?”

Pure Vanilla smiles up at him, gently squeezing Shadow Milk’s hand.

“Can you teach me how to fly?”

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It turns out, Shadow Milk can teach him.

Slowly. Very, very slowly.

“You’re so bad at this.” Shadow Milk’s reclining in the air, watching Pure Vanilla with an air of deep amusement. They’ve been at this for days now; Pure Vanilla had been remarkably insistent about it, wanting to practice every evening possible even with his paltry results. Most of their lessons, if one could call them that, are spent out on the balcony with Shadow Milk attempting to guide Pure Vanilla through the steps.

Well, *guide* may be a bit generous. It’s more making fun of him than anything.

Pure Vanilla’s face is screwed up in concentration, both hands gripped tight around his staff. He’s hovering – shakily – a single foot off the ground. He tries to take a single step and immediately wobbles like a newborn fawn, fighting to keep his balance as Shadow Milk snickers above.

“Aw,” Shadow Milk coos, folding his hands beneath his chin. “So pathetic. It’s adorable.”

“It’s hard,” Pure Vanilla mutters breathlessly, trembling as he cautiously repositions his feet beneath him. “This is... very... unintuitive.”

“You’ve done it before.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, flipping upside-down as he grins at the other. “Back when you *awakened*? A funny little term, by the way. You’re clearly still asleep if you think the truth’s going to get you anywhere in this world.”

“Yes...” Pure Vanilla wobbles dangerously again. “But I wasn’t... thinking about it... back then.”

Shadow Milk sighs, letting his arms drape limply at his sides. “Obviously, fool. That’s why you *could* do it. I’ve told you a million times, you’re overthinking this.”

A sharp gasp – Pure Vanilla drops, feet hitting the ground as he stumbles slightly. There’s a small noise of frustration as he glances back up to Shadow Milk. “It’s unintuitive,” he

repeats, looking adorably cross about it. “To both perform magic and not think about performing it at the same time.”

“It’s not ‘not thinking about it’,” Shadow Milk corrects, flipping around again as he floats closer. “It’s about refusing to bow to your precious reality and instead bending it to your own will.” He perks a brow. “You don’t *believe* you’re as light as a feather.”

“Because I’m not,” Pure Vanilla sighs. “I know I’m not. It’s hard not to think about it.”

“And that,” Shadow Milk replies easily, leaning forward to poke Pure Vanilla’s forehead, “is what the kids these days call a *skill issue*.”

Pure Vanilla’s pouty little frown twitches slightly. “You really like that phrase.”

“I do. I think of it often when I look at you.” Shadow Milk grins, all teeth. “My little wobbly lamb.”

A soft laugh follows. “A new pet name?”

“If you’d like to call an insult that, sure.” Shadow Milk floats backwards, tapping the balcony railing with his cane. “Now try again.”

Another hour or so passes with little to show for it; Pure Vanilla manages to get another few inches off the ground, but he never makes it more than a step or two before he’s dropping back down to the ground. The fact he’s trying to take steps at all is a poor show of progress, one that Shadow Milk not-so-patiently tries to point out with little success as he floats aimlessly to and fro.

Eventually Shadow Milk’s patience for the night reaches its end and he ends the lecture; yet, the open frustration on Pure Vanilla’s face softens his mockery into little more than an amused sigh.

Perhaps they need to end on a pleasant note for once.

“Here.” Shadow Milk extends a hand; Pure Vanilla tiredly glances up from his seat on the floor. “Come on,” Shadow Milk continues coaxingly. “You’ve tried very hard, Wobbles. Don’t sulk.”

“I’m not sulking,” Pure Vanilla corrects, sulkily. Still, he takes the offered hand; Shadow Milk grasps tight, pulling the other to his feet.

“You need motivation,” Shadow Milk decides, giving his grumpy little pupil a once-over. “Have you ever sat on a cloud before?”

Pure Vanilla blinks. “Clouds are just water,” he says after a moment. “I’d get soggy. And they’re not solid enough to-”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, swiftly ascending with Pure Vanilla in tow; the other lets out a startled noise, cutting off whatever rambling nonsense he’d been spouting. Shadow Milk bends down, grabbing both of the other’s hands as they fly upwards; Pure Vanilla’s sullen

expression has changed to one of delight, a nervous laugh bubbling from his lips as Shadow Milk smirks down at him.

The nearest cloud isn't terribly far off, a plump little cumulus that's been drifting by for some time. Shadow Milk gently tugs Pure Vanilla over to it; he feels the other's hesitation, an attempt to pull back just slightly. "Wait," Pure Vanilla begins, "I really will get soggy if you-"

The only warning Shadow Milk gives is a sharp grin before he promptly throws Pure Vanilla straight into the cloud.

Pure Vanilla's panicked flailing is deeply amusing in and of itself; doubly so when Shadow Milk watches the other's head poke out of the puffy sea of white and blink in astonishment. He watches Pure Vanilla test his surroundings, smoothing his hand over the curves of the remarkably solid cloud; when he looks up, Shadow Milk merely perks a brow.

"You always seem to forget," Shadow Milk remarks idly, "that I am a being of unparalleled magical power. Honestly, it's very rude of you."

"I'm not soggy," Pure Vanilla replies in wonder.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, floating over to sit on the cloud beside the other. "You are not soggy," he repeats in amusement.

"This is amazing." Pure Vanilla waves a hand through the mist, watching it part beneath his touch. "How are you doing this?"

"I decided I wanted to sit on it, and I decided we weren't going to be soggy when we did so." Shadow Milk leans to the side, flopping over to rest his head upon Pure Vanilla's lap. "I told you, reality is what you make of it."

Pure Vanilla's hand lowers, stroking gently through Shadow Milk's hair. "This is lovely. Do you do this often?"

"Nah." Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder, allowing his eyes to slip shut as Pure Vanilla continues petting him. "Too much effort."

"Well, I thank you for the effort tonight." Pure Vanilla shifts slightly, jostling Shadow Milk in his lap and earning an irritable growl in reply. "Sorry, sorry." The hand returns, trailing a line down Shadow Milk's jaw. "Just trying to reposition my staff so I can see better."

"The view's nothing special." Shadow Milk yawns, arching his back slightly in a stretch. "I've seen better."

"So you've said." Pure Vanilla scratches gently under Shadow Milk cheek; surprisingly, Shadow Milk finds the sensation rather pleasing. "Can you tell me about them?"

Shadow Milk hums, tilting his head to give Pure Vanilla better access. "Hmph. Well..." A pause as he thinks. "I was always fond of the view from the volcanoes in the Dragon's Valley. The sky's never blue there; the smoke changes it to a mix of orange and pinks, depending on the time of day."

“Sounds beautiful.” Pure Vanilla’s smile is obvious, even through Shadow Milk’s closed eyes. “What else?”

“The Cream Cake mountains aren’t half-bad. The snowfall is thick, but if you can get past the cloud barrier, you can see all the little villages as specks of light from above.” Shadow Milk clicks his tongue. “Well. If they’re still there.”

“I’m sure they are.” Pure Vanilla smooths his hand over the top of Shadow Milk’s head. “Have you not gone back since?”

“Nah.” Shadow Milk shrugs again. “No time. Had to get a new body, rebuild my spire, you know the deal. Busy, busy.”

“You could go now,” Pure Vanilla offers gently. “I wouldn’t mind, if you’re missing it.”

Shadow Milk says nothing for a moment; Pure Vanilla’s hand stills in his hair. “No point,” Shadow Milk finally replies, tone neutral. “It’s too far from here. The bond wouldn’t like it.”

“I see.” Pure Vanilla’s hand is still resting motionlessly atop Shadow Milk’s head; he nudges upwards impatiently, and the hand begins moving again. “I am working on it, you know.”

“On?”

“Our connection.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is gentle, yet serious. “I’ve been writing letters to try and figure out a solution. I thought you should know that.”

“Letters?” Shadow Milk’s eyes crack open. “To who?”

Pure Vanilla’s smile is soft, yet sad. “The one who knows the Witches’ work best.”

White Lily Cookie.

Shadow Milk scowls immediately, pushing himself up from Pure Vanilla’s lap. “That little weed? What happened to ‘none of his business’ with Dark Cacao Cookie? What happened to prattling on about it was too dangerous to be known?”

“It is dangerous,” Pure Vanilla affirms gently. “Which is why I have only spoken to White Lily Cookie on the matter, and only through coded letters. Dark Cacao Cookie’s visit reminded me that I should place more trust in my comrades, and none are better suited to assisting me in this than she.”

“Trust her? That little half-Cookie?” Shadow Milk sneers. “Oh, you truly are going senile, old fool.”

“The Faerie Kingdom’s library is vast.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is steady, patient. “Elder Faerie Cookie’s personal journals, I’m told, are even more illuminating. White Lily Cookie has access to both, and has told me she is making promising headway in her research into the matter.”

“I,” Shadow Milk hisses back, “am *well acquainted* with the Faerie Kingdom.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches out, as if instinctively, before he draws it back under Shadow Milk’s angry stare. “I know, Shadow Milk Cookie. Which is why I would not ask you to go there, nor will I force you to accept her aid. We are speaking on the subject, nothing more.”

Shadow Milk sharply averts his gaze, glaring daggers into the cloud. “She’s using you. This is a ploy for her pathetic little binding ritual, nothing more. What have you told her about me, hm? What has she asked?”

“Nothing,” Pure Vanilla replies quietly. “I have spoken only of myself, and the technicalities of our bond.”

“Liar. She’s asked.”

“She is... concerned.” Pure Vanilla’s admittance feels reluctant at best. “But, she has not pushed me past my refusal to answer. Nor will I allow her to return you to the Silver Tree, if that is what you fear.”

“Liar.” Shadow Milk pushes himself up off the cloud, keeping his back to the other. “She’ll just trick you. She’s done it before. You’re so gullible, so forgiving to that half-wilted weed.”

“Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Oh, spare me.” Refusing to look, refusing to even acknowledge the wretched little fool sitting behind him. “Everyone knows how you are about her. Your weak point, your precious little lily.”

“Shadow Milk Cookie.” Firm, unyielding.

“You love her.” An accusation, sharp and pointed.

“I care for her.” Effortless, without hesitation. “She has always been important to me. She always will be.”

Shadow Milk’s teeth clench. “Shut up.”

“I know you want me to lie to you right now.” Pure Vanilla’s tone is so pathetically gentle, so patient. “But I won’t. You’d see through it either way.” A pause. “Have you ever read the works of Kanten Cookie?”

A topic shift, abrupt and strange enough to make Shadow Milk turn around in disbelief. “What?”

“It is a vast oversimplification of his writings, but...” Pure Vanilla shifts slightly, placing his staff in his lap. “There’s a question posed that I reflect on often when I think about my truth, and your deceit. A scenario in which an enemy comes to my door seeking a friend I’m hiding within my home, who asks me if my friend is in there with me.” Pure Vanilla smiles. “As a beacon of truth, what do you think my answer would be?”

Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest, giving Pure Vanilla a sweeping once-over. “You would say no,” he says finally.

Pure Vanilla nods. “I would.”

“Because,” Shadow Milk supplies, “you see truth for what it is. Weakness. You’re learning to embrace deceit.”

A considering sound as Pure Vanilla tilts his head. “Not quite,” he remarks. “Rather, I see it as truthfully answering a different question.”

Shadow Milk scoffs. “Oh?”

“The enemy is not actually asking if my friend is in there with me.” Pure Vanilla folds his hands atop his staff. “Instead, what is truly being asked is – may I come inside to harm your friend?” Pure Vanilla’s smile deepens. “And to that, my honest answer is no.”

“Semantics,” Shadow Milk dismisses. “Distorting reality to suit your purposes.”

“Is that not what you’ve been trying to teach me to do all along?”

Hm. Fair.

“Regardless,” Pure Vanilla continues, “the reason I bring it up is that I wish to answer the question you are not asking outright.” His gaze softens. “No, I do not intend to pursue White Lily Cookie.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow to slits. “I didn’t ask if you were,” he snaps.

“I know. I’m answering anyway.” Pure Vanilla’s meeting Shadow Milk’s irritable glare all too steadily. “White Lily Cookie is important to me. As are my friends, as are my people. They will always hold a special place in my heart. That does not in any way diminish my fondness for you, or the hold you have upon my affections.”

“Who,” Shadow Milk hisses, cheeks flushed, “*asked*.”

“I will not let you be resealed.” Firm, absolute. “Even if you were to turn against me in an instant, I will not force that fate upon you.”

Shadow Milk lets out another scoff, hands folding across his chest. “Disagreeing with the Witches again?”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla replies simply. “If we must crumble together, let us crumble. But so long as I stand, I will not allow White Lily Cookie or any other to lock you away again.” Another small, soft smile. “And if I cannot stop it, I will go with you. I will bear that eternity so that you do not have to be alone again.”

A flicker of something dark and anxious, a pull that draws Shadow Milk closer even as his hands ball into fists. “A lot of talk,” he says coolly, forbidding the heated pulse in his Soul Jam, “for the one speaking to another woman behind my back.”

This seems to amuse Pure Vanilla; there's a quiet huff of a laugh as Pure Vanilla lifts his hand in offering. "My apologies," he says softly. "I did not wish to deceive you. I know you do not care for her, and that the feeling is mutual. But I promise none of our correspondence went beyond business. And I do think she can help."

Shadow Milk reluctantly takes the hand, even with a dismissive turn of his head. "I don't want her help."

"And I don't want to be your cage."

A simple, yet effective remark; Shadow Milk's eyes widen as Pure Vanilla offers him a gentle smile. "I will not force you into anything," Pure Vanilla continues kindly. "But I also do not wish to hold you here against your will. If..." A pause, a sigh. "If this is to... continue, I would like it to be with the reassurance that you want to be here. Not because you have to be."

Despite it all, Shadow Milk's lips twitch with a smirk. "Don't trust me?"

Pure Vanilla lifts a brow, eyes searching. "Should I?"

A beat of silence that stretches on; Shadow Milk can feel the weight of Pure Vanilla's stare before finally looking away. "Who knows."

"Well," Pure Vanilla replies, giving their hands a gentle squeeze, "I'd like to find out someday. But for now, our research into the bond is only talk. If White Lily Cookie even finds a solution within her archives remains to be seen. So, if it pleases you, we can set the topic aside for now."

"Fine." Shadow Milk glances down, watching the Cookies far below mill like ants beneath their feet. "Should we head back? I think you've had plenty of motivation for the night." A pause. "Wobbles."

"Oh, dear." Pure Vanilla's pushing himself up with his staff, getting to his feet with an unsteady sway. "Is that to be my nickname now?"

"Until you've earned otherwise." Shadow Milk gives Pure Vanilla's hand a gentle tug; carefully, the other's pulled off the cloud, floating in mid-air beside him. "You'll accept my ways of deceit eventually."

"Perhaps." The same neutral answer, accompanied by an oh-so familiar smile. "May I ask something?"

"No," Shadow Milk replies easily; he begins floating backwards, a slow descent that drags Pure Vanilla along with him. "I've heard enough out of you. Talk, talk, talk, that's all you do. Really, Wobbles, you put my own showmanship to shame."

Pure Vanilla laughs; being pulled at this angle allows his long hair to flow freely behind him in the wind. "It was a short question!"

“Don’t care.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, a simple spiral that twirls Pure Vanilla along with him. “No more talking. You can chatter my ear off after we connect.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla’s reply is breathless, his eyes sparkling. “You want to?”

“Of course.” Shadow Milk gives him an amused once-over. “If we’re to be rid of this pesky little bond, we may as well enjoy the good bits while we have them.” He leans in, face inches from Pure Vanilla’s own as he bares his teeth in a grin. “Any objections?”

Pure Vanilla laughs. “None at all.”

“Good.” Shadow Milk turns, accelerating their descent as he makes for the balcony doors. Pure Vanilla is pulled effortlessly behind him, little more than a feather in the wind; perhaps it’s this charming lightness, perhaps it’s the warmth of their hands clutched together, but something stirs in Shadow Milk’s chest long enough for him to slyly add: “And you can have a kiss, if you’re good.”

Pure Vanilla’s expression lights up immediately; Shadow Milk simply rolls his eyes, averting his own amused gaze away as he heads straight down, ignoring the tickle in his jam.

So easy to please.

Chapter 21

Shadow Milk does his best to not think about White Lily Cookie.

The matter is largely out of his hands. The annulment of the bond is important and, with his once wondrous library of ages past torn apart long ago, there's not a lot of options left for his own research. Shadow Milk has no intention of revisiting the Faerie Kingdom if he can help it, and his long-standing fantasy of burning the place to the ground doesn't help him much here either. Annoyingly, White Lily Cookie likely is the best Cookie for the job to sniff out the weakness in – whatever had passed that night.

Although Shadow Milk had tried to pry apart the spell binding them at the start, it's irritating how fluidly it slips through his grasp. The magic isn't entirely foreign to him, a potent mix of Light and Dark, but it is somehow impossible to dissect in its entirety. The closest he's ever gotten is a quick, fleeting glimpse of silver before his Soul Jam had sharply protested and broken his concentration through a burst of pain. Whatever this spell is, it's nimbly avoiding his sight in ways he can't explain, and punishing him for trying.

The blame surely rests on Pure Vanilla Cookie's shoulders. His use of trickery and manipulating Shadow Milk's magics in ways the other can't possibly understand had no doubt been the cause of their current predicament. Unfortunately, Pure Vanilla's self-claimed ignorance of the matter – which Shadow Milk reluctantly believes – is of no help either. Every possible solution returns to White Lily Cookie's expertise as their best chance, as revolting a prospect as it is.

So, Shadow Milk does his best not to think about it, and busies himself with new tasks to occupy his days.

Their flight lessons continue on and off; Pure Vanilla is making some improvements, though he's still remarkably wobbly for such a powerful caster. He'd even made it entirely off the balcony once, beaming with pride; only for his legs to shake and for him to lose balance, turning over entirely in the air as his robes flipped up to dangle around his head. Shadow Milk's immediate fit of cackling laughter had done little to ease the deep flush in Pure Vanilla's cheeks when the other had finally righted himself.

It had taken quite a bit of wheedling and cajoling to make Pure Vanilla rescind his huffy banishment of Shadow Milk from the bedroom that night.

Even with the new set of rules they've set in place, remarkably little is different between them. Shadow Milk's teasing flippancy is still met with admonishment or amusement depending on which buttons he presses; Pure Vanilla is equally stalwart in his affections or thoughtful little comments that slip under Shadow Milk's dough. Their days are always spent together, waiting out meetings or strolling through the markets with Shadow Milk curled up in his favorite cloak. Evenings are apportioned to lessons or games, and nights typically end with a heady connection or simply nestling up together in bed.

They do kiss, sometimes – but even that feels strangely normal after the first few times. Pure Vanilla seems insistent on being ever the gentleman, asking politely with his words or obvious pauses as he leans in close. Shadow Milk will, when it suits him, seek out one or two of his own – largely for the reaction, largely to please or tease a content little smile from Pure Vanilla's lips. The exchange is always pleasant and usually chaste – unless, once again, the mood strikes and Shadow Milk coaxes Pure Vanilla further.

Amusingly, Pure Vanilla is always more than happy to oblige.

There is a bit more travel involved in their day-to-day life. Beyond simply spending the evenings at home, occasionally they'll go down to the Crow's Nest Inn to meet with Black Raisin Cookie. Despite Pure Vanilla's encouragement, Shadow Milk prefers to remain disguised; the enthusiastic attitudes of other Cookies at the inn put him ill at ease, especially when they clap his back just a tad too hard in welcome. Perhaps they'd refrain from touching someone of Lady Milk Crown Cookie's stature, but she'd not be caught crumbled in such an establishment.

She's the subject of some salacious gossip nonetheless. Shadow Milk's been amused to see Pure Vanilla cornered more than once by the villagers demanding information on his mystery woman.

How quickly rumors spread.

Still, at Pure Vanilla's doe-eyed insistence, Shadow Milk does temper the illusion around his form. His usual face is presented without the mark over his eye, and his hair is often tied up in a high ponytail with its eyes firmly shut at all times. His normal outfit is traded in for simple pair of slim black pants and a ruffled white blouse, Soul Jam tucked on a chain beneath. It's not altogether too different from his usual get-up, but different and plain enough to not have drawn any obvious recognition so far. Or perhaps Shadow Milk Cookie has simply badly underestimated his face's staying power with the banners finally taken down.

He keeps his heeled boots. Pure Vanilla isn't getting an extra inch on him, disguise or not.

While he may peruse the bar as Blackcurrant Cookie, a complete stranger to these parts, it in no way seems to dampen the friendliness of the other Cookies who stop by their table. They're there for Pure Vanilla Cookie, of course, but they greet Shadow Milk with equal enthusiasm just the same.

They also seem to like his stories.

The first time it happened had been a complete accident; Shadow Milk had been reclining in his chair, boots propped on the table as he'd recounted a tale of gargantuan Jelly Worms that had terrorized a valley long ago. Pure Vanilla Cookie had been particularly enraptured, but Black Raisin Cookie had been giving Shadow Milk a dubious look over the rim of her glass. Perhaps in retaliation, Shadow Milk had thoughtlessly conjured images of the beasts overhead – hulking illusions that had bared their numerous fangs for effect.

When a sharp, collective gasp had rocked the room, Shadow Milk had hastily undone the spell – but the damage was already done. Yet despite the initial murmurings of surprise, the

unease had quickly morphed into open interest and intrigue.

Now, every time he takes a single step inside the bar, Shadow Milk's quickly flocked to by eager patrons all clamoring for a tale. They usher him onto the inn's stage, pay for his drinks, stare with starry eyes as Shadow Milk's initial reluctant mutterings have turned to fantastical retellings of fabled adventures. Battles with dragons, magical labyrinths, even a muddled tale or two from his own past deeds all draw murmurs of delight from the crowd he so effortlessly gathers around him. Painting the scenery of his stories is all too easy for a master illusionist; he effortlessly fills the bar with starry spectacles and ethereal summons that quake the very room with their roars.

Dazzling a crowd is easy; yet for every shout and cheer he receives at the end of a performance, he finds he most enjoys simply slipping back to the table and returning to drinks with his friends.

Shadow Milk supposes that's what they are now. How terribly sentimental of him.

Beyond the usual trips to the tavern, Pure Vanilla's interest in far-away places has also reinvigorated Shadow Milk's desire to travel again. While he can't stray too far beyond the Vanilla Kingdom's borders without the connection tugging him back, Pure Vanilla seems all too happy to accompany Shadow Milk on shorter, but more exploratory day trips across Earthbread. Pure Vanilla has to dress warm to not shiver the flour from his dough when crossing snowy peaks, but there's something distinctly charming about such a usually elegant Cookie being bundled up in coats and boots like a marshmallow puff.

There'd been – an attempt, with the portals. Shadow Milk is more than happy to provide a more expedient journey across Earthbread's many wonders, but Pure Vanilla's hesitance has been noted. Even simply gazing into the rifts of Shadow Milk's Other-Realm draws a tension to Pure Vanilla's shoulders, a tight grasping of his staff that is impossible to ignore. He'd run his hand through the portal once, watching it shimmer from Shadow Milk's blues and blacks to a mix of bright gold – yet still, Pure Vanilla had taken a step back and shaken his head with a sad smile.

Understandable, Shadow Milk supposes. He doesn't push the issue, and Pure Vanilla seems grateful for it.

Still, they can reach plenty far just hand-in-hand amongst the clouds. Much of the Vanilla Kingdom's borders are surrounded by forest; while Shadow Milk had explored much of the Fig Forest on his lonesome, the lush flora of the Greensalad Jungle is far more impressive from on high. They lunch upon fresh fruit atop towering jungle trees and watch from the leafy shadows as Butter Tigers prowl about below. More pleasant still are the numerous beaches that line the northern half of the island, a perfect place to watch the sun set as the pair recline in the sand and let the fading light warm their dough.

Even after the sun's set, the cool ocean breeze that ruffles through Shadow Milk's hair is surprisingly pleasant. The moonlight glitters beautifully off crashing waves that roll to a gentle stop at their feet before slowly being tugged back into the depths. It's one of Shadow Milk's favorite places to end the day, resting his head against Pure Vanilla's chest as they lay together and simply watch the ebb and flow of the tides.

Only once had they given in and indulged in a connection, alone on the beach beneath the stars – when they'd finally awoken, dazed and parched, the sun had already been high in the sky. Upon their return, the Neapolitan sisters had practically been beside themselves, giving no quarter to the pair guiltily slinking back in through the balcony door.

Still, the shy look Pure Vanilla's face as he was having the sand brushed from his hair had made it worth it in the end.

Yet, as busy as Shadow Milk's days have become, there's always a sinking feeling in his chest that persists. The presence of tomorrow hangs over him like a cloud, marring moments of peace with a spark of remembrance that he quickly tries to discard. The connection needs to be broken – he knows it, Pure Vanilla knows it, but the one that may hold the answers never strays too far from Shadow Milk's uneasy mind.

Which is why it is no surprise that when he returns from a flight one night, it is to Pure Vanilla sitting at his desk, a letter in hand and a strained look on his face. When Shadow Milk sits on the bed, Pure Vanilla looks up and gives him a smile that is too thin, too weary. Shadow Milk knows what's happened from his expression alone, and doesn't have the good grace to pretend otherwise.

"What did she say?"

Pure Vanilla sets the letter down on the desk with a sigh. "White Lily Cookie has made substantial progress. She..." A pause. "She believes she may have a solution."

"Alright." Shadow Milk crosses his legs, arms folding across his chest. "And what is it?"

"She does not say." Pure Vanilla's arm rests on the desk as he gives Shadow Milk a steady look. "She requests a visit in person to confirm it."

"No." Shadow Milk's response is immediate, clipped and curt.

Pure Vanilla's reply is calm, patient. "You do not trust her."

Shadow Milk's eyes narrow. He does not need to return such an obvious statement.

"I understand. But I also need to establish my feelings on the matter." Pure Vanilla turns in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. "Is this a conversation you wish to have now?"

A growing feeling of tension in Shadow Milk's shoulders, even as he shrugs one carelessly.

"Very well." A slow exhale of breath. "You know who White Lily Cookie is to me. I will not belabor this point. But I do want to make it very clear, Shadow Milk Cookie, that she is welcome in my home. Even if you wish to forbid her presence here, I will not accept that, nor any attempts to bar any others of my comrades from my walls."

Shadow Milk says nothing, continuing to watch unhappily from the bed. Pure Vanilla Cookie is not finished; that much is clear.

“White Lily Cookie offers her aid to me, because we are friends.” Gentle words, yet firm and unyielding. “I do not presume she would offer it to you alone. Your actions resulted in the passing of a Cookie very dear to her. This is not something I can mend, nor is it my place to. You have changed, but forgiving you is only a choice I can make for myself.” A pause, as if waiting for a reply Shadow Milk isn’t giving. “If White Lily Cookie seeks to harm you, I will not allow that - nor will I allow you to inflict any further cruelty upon her.”

Silence stretches across the room. Pure Vanilla perks a brow, as if surprised by Shadow Milk’s unbroken quiet. Another moment passes before Pure Vanilla continues: “If White Lily Cookie has an answer, I would like to hear it. I wish to welcome her to my home. But,” Pure Vanilla sighs, leaning back, “this is also your home. So, I would like to hear what you have to say on the matter as well.”

“I have nothing to say.”

A surprised blink from Pure Vanilla follows; he straightens up in his chair, brow knitting together. “Nothing?”

Shadow Milk gives him a passive once-over before replying: “I don’t feel like having a fight tonight, Nilly. I don’t want her here. I don’t trust anything she has to say. But you do on both accounts, so nothing I say on it matters.”

“Of course it matters.” Pure Vanilla’s pushing himself out of his chair, leaning heavily on his staff. “As I said, this is your home too.”

“You can’t have it both ways,” Shadow Milk replies coolly; Pure Vanilla’s made his way over to the bed, settling down and creaking the mattress with his weight. “If you want her here, bring her. Your choice overrules mine.”

“I’d like it to be your choice too.” Pure Vanilla’s trying to catch his gaze, which Shadow Milk stubbornly refuses. “I know that breaking the bond is important to you.”

“I’m not sorry.”

Pure Vanilla cocks his head. “What?”

“I,” Shadow Milk says slowly, finally turning his head to meet Pure Vanilla’s searching eyes, “am not sorry. About Elder Faerie Cookie’s demise, about every scrap of suffering I inflicted on that miserable kingdom.” Shadow Milk perks a brow. “You act like there’s something to mend, or that I want to.” Shadow Milk pushes himself off the bed away from the other, floating up into the air as he maintains eye contact. “That gnat and weed sealed me away, together. I was close, *so close* to breaking free. It is his fault, and hers, that I languished in that prison for another century.”

“You’re still angry,” Pure Vanilla says quietly.

“Of course I’m still *angry*,” Shadow Milk hisses, all teeth – before abruptly recomposing himself. No. This is what Pure Vanilla wants, a long, drawn-out discussion where he can find

little edges to peel back and argue his defense. Shadow Milk isn't playing that game right now.

He'd had his eye on a lovely cove for their dinner tonight. So much for that plan.

"She can hate me," Shadow Milk says after a moment. "I don't care, Pure Vanilla Cookie. Do what you want."

"What is going to happen when she comes?"

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes – for all the niceties, it's still a *when*, not an *if*. "I'm more curious about the *how*." Deflection, instant. "As the new jailor of my precious, original dough, I hardly think she has time to spare to flit across Earthbread."

Pure Vanilla motions to the desk. "Her letter came with a small shard of Moonstone, imbued with her magic. With the spell included in her letter, she claims I will be able to summon an apparition of herself that should be able to communicate and channel her magic, while her dough remains in the Faerie Kingdom."

"How quaint." Shadow Milk doesn't bat an eye. "I'm sure you two will have loads of sickly sweet fun together."

"Are you going to leave again?"

The question is quiet, yet drapes heavily over Shadow Milk's shoulders. He doesn't have an answer; not one he's sure of, anyway. "Who knows."

"I'd like to know." Pure Vanilla's pushing himself off the bed now, stepping forward with a serious expression. "I know I'm asking a lot of you."

"Have you asked her?" Shadow Milk shoots back.

"Yes." Instant and firm. "I know your dislike of each other is mutual. I know it is not unfounded, but Elder Faerie Cookie was a friend of mine as well. Do you feel any remorse, knowing that?"

"You ask me to sympathize with my warden." Shadow Milk Cookie puts his back to the other, training his eyes on the ceiling overhead. "Your buffoonery never ceases to amaze, you know that?"

"Shadow Milk."

"You speak," Shadow Milk hisses, "of *remorse*?" He refuses to turn around, refuses to meet the gaze he feels upon his back. "Elder Faerie Cookie made his decision. He upheld the Witches' decree until the very end. I did not ask for his life. He gave it freely."

"He gave his life to stop you. Your intent was to harm his people."

"My *intent*," Shadow Milk laughs, feeling an edge of hysteria in his voice, "was to escape! Something he, none of those wretched little Faeries would allow, ever! Do you think I never

tried using my *words*, Pure Vanilla Cookie? Do you think the once-great Fount of Knowledge was not above trying to *bargain*? But who, oh *who* would listen to a Beast of Deceit?” Shadow Milk’s hands ball into fists, teeth baring as he snarls: “Yes, I had a little fun with it. *Sooooooo* sorry! Forgive me for enjoying myself after an eternity of *nothingness* behind bars.”

“I have already agreed that your imprisonment was not just.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is so steady, so unbending. “That does not excuse every action you took in response. Far from it.”

“Would you prefer I’d crumbled?” Shadow Milk cocks his head to the backwards to shoot Pure Vanilla an unkind smile, a twisted angle as his body remains forward. “I thought about it, you know. You, who spoke of *not staying*? Believe me, I was looking for that door too!”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes widen.

“Too bad!” Shadow Milk’s head snaps upwards in a sickening crunch, removing Pure Vanilla from his sight. “No such luck! Eternity means eternity, dollface! No matter what I did, a soul’s a soul! Can’t snuff it out on a whim, no matter how hard you try! And boy, did I *try*!”

“Shadow-”

“I existed,” Shadow Milk continues, voice sickeningly sweet. “But I was not living. So, if you want me to reconsider trading his life for mine, I’ll turn you down every time. *Friend*.”

Quiet settles over the room, oppressive and cold. There’s flickers of darkness ebbing and flowing, an afterthought of the violence shuddering through Shadow Milk’s jam. He can hear Pure Vanilla’s subtle shifting on the bed; the other is thinking, practically audibly in the silence that Shadow Milk can no longer bear.

“Honestly!” he continues loudly, “aren’t we so lucky I failed! Really, it’d be such a shame to rob this world of my grandeur. What’s life without a little spectacle, hm? Can’t let you little do-gooders have all the fun. And really, is it not a testament to my own power to be so unerasable? I’ll take applause any time now.”

More silence; it drags on Shadow Milk’s dough, makes his mouth twist unpleasantly. He takes in an angry breath-

“Can you sit with me?”

The request is hoarse, rasped through an audibly tight throat. Shadow Milk whirls around immediately, a jolt clutching at his chest as he sees Pure Vanilla staring back at him; there’s a small smile on his lips, but his eyes are speckled with unmistakable beginnings of tears.

Shadow Milk is before the bed in an instant, before he himself even realizes. His hands come up, hastily smoothing across Pure Vanilla’s cheeks as he stammers: “Hey! Hey, what’s all this about?”

Pure Vanilla sniffs loudly; he rubs at his eyes with one hand, swallowing thickly. He doesn’t say anything, so Shadow Milk holds his tongue, simply continuing to cradle the other’s face as Pure Vanilla blinks back further tears. A shuddering inhale as Pure Vanilla composes

himself again; his pinched expression slowly slackens, until it's entirely replaced by a small, fragile smile.

"Seriously, Nilly," Shadow Milk promises, trying a thin grin of his own. "I'm fine. Don't go getting sentimental on me now, okay?"

A beat passes as they look at one another; finally, Pure Vanilla replies with a soft, repeated: "Can you sit with me?"

Shadow Milk acquiesces immediately, sitting down beside Pure Vanilla with his hands in his lap. Pure Vanilla's own hand is placed on his thigh, a gentle touch that tickles strangely in Shadow Milk's chest.

"I'm sorry."

The words immediately draw Shadow Milk's attention as he snaps his head to pin Pure Vanilla with a disbelieving stare. "What?" he laughs after a moment. "Nilly, why are you apologizing to *me*? I'm the one you're mad at."

"I'm not mad." Pure Vanilla's eyes lid sadly, even if his smile remains. "I'm sorry that I brought up Elder Faerie Cookie up in such a manner. It wasn't the right time for such a discussion. I only knew him for a short time, but I still grieve him, and that clouded my judgement."

Shadow Milk glances away, a bundle of nerves in his chest. "I can't change what happened. You're the one insisting on forgiving me."

"I do forgive you," Pure Vanilla affirms quietly. "It doesn't erase what you've done, or the people you've hurt. But you've changed quite a bit in our time together. I'd like to believe that means something for the future."

In the past, Shadow Milk would have bristled at such an insinuation – now, he just feels worn, stretched paper-thin. "I didn't ask for his life."

"I know." The hand smooths gently over Shadow Milk's knee. "And I know you're still hurting. In time, when you're ready, I'd like to be able to talk about it with you. To see if someday you can forgive him the way I've forgiven you. But that doesn't have to be tonight."

Petulant refusal rises in Shadow Milk's chest; he says nothing, only stares emptily at the wall.

"I'm frightened," Pure Vanilla comments, almost off-handedly; Shadow Milk blinks, glancing over.

"Of me?"

"Of you and White Lily Cookie, together." Pure Vanilla's hand lifts from Shadow Milk's knee, folding back in his lap. "I care for you both deeply. I'm afraid that should you two meet, you will clash and bring harm to the other. I don't want to see either of you hurt, yet I cannot help but feel it is inevitable."

“Because it is.” Shadow Milk leans, bumping his shoulder gently against Pure Vanilla’s. “I keep telling you, Nilly. The truth is ugly.”

A sigh, low and soft. “Is there truly no other outcome?”

“I don’t think so.” Shadow Milk’s gaze roams idly over the room, his legs kicking back and forth. “We both took something precious from the other. I can pretty up the place with a deceitfully sweet smile, but it’s not going to work. I mean,” Shadow Milk continues, shrugging one shoulder, “look at us. You actively chose to forgive me, despite *everything*, and we still hurt each other nearly every step of the way.”

Pure Vanilla hums, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I suppose you have a point.”

“Unfortunately,” Shadow Milk drawls. “I can’t kiss my way out of this one, Nilly. Put us in the same room, and White Lily Cookie and I are going to fight. Better accept it now.”

There’s an amused glance from Pure Vanilla. “How remarkably truthful of you.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Such bold words from a Cookie who’s already been thrown out a window once.”

Pure Vanilla huffs a laugh; his hand returns, now resting atop Shadow Milk’s on the bed. “May I ask you something?”

“You’re going to anyway.”

A gentle squeeze in reply. “Tell me,” Pure Vanilla murmurs, “what can I do to make this easier for you? I do not want to bar White Lily Cookie from my life, or my home. But I also do not want you to feel as if my say is the only one that matters.”

Shadow Milk takes a moment to think. There’s many things he wants, but the first, immediate thoughts are ones he knows Pure Vanilla will not accept. After a moment, he finally replies: “I don’t want her in the castle.” When Pure Vanilla’s mouth opens to reply, Shadow Milk interrupts with: “I know this is your home. But you said it’s my home, too.”

“It is,” Pure Vanilla affirms after a moment.

“Then,” Shadow Milk continues, “I don’t want her here. I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder for a sealing spell every time I go down to breakfast or curl up in a shadow.” He gives Pure Vanilla a cautious glance. “You trust her. I don’t. I don’t want someone I don’t trust in my home.”

“I see.” Pure Vanilla’s quiet for a long moment; as he thinks, Shadow Milk allows his gaze to wander across the room, idly picking out a single crack in the ceiling. Hm. They’ll have to get that fixed. Finally, Pure Vanilla replies: “Alright.”

Shadow Milk cocks his head. “Really?”

“Yes.” Pure Vanilla’s tone is remarkably decided. “You deserve a space that you feel safe in. You cannot freely leave this one without me, so... it is not an unreasonable request, for now. I

will treat with her on the castle grounds, and should we find it necessary to enter the castle for its library or other resources, I will warn you first.” Pure Vanilla turns his head, looking at Shadow Milk head-on. “Agreed?”

“Fine.” It’s more than Shadow Milk had expected, really.

“In return,” Pure Vanilla continues, “I would like you to be civil with her.”

Shadow Milk scoffs. “Sheesh! That’s a way taller ask than mine.”

“Not to me.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze is firm. “This is important. I don’t want the people I love hurting one another.”

A *tsk* under his breath before Shadow Milk lets out a small sigh. “Compromise?”

“I’m listening.”

“I wasn’t planning on hanging around either way.” Shadow Milk motions to the darkness in the corner of the room. “I’d rather just watch. You two can hash out all the sordid little details by yourselves – if I have input, I’ll tell you later.”

“Watch?” Pure Vanilla queries; Shadow Milk slips his hand out from Pure Vanilla’s, lifting it up to tap the other just above his eyes. Pure Vanilla blinks, recognition dawning. “Ah.”

“Forgot about that, did we?” Shadow Milk says with a smile. “I’m telling you, the view’s great from my Other-Realm. So, you two can chat, work out all the details, and I’ll stay comfy, cozy and far away from all that ugly little tension. Deal?”

Pure Vanilla looks him over, expression slightly saddened. “If that is what you think is best.”

“I do.” Shadow Milk gently pats Pure Vanilla’s shoulder. “Cheer up, Wobbles. If it helps, I’ll be enjoying watching you miss me.” His eyes narrow. “You better miss me.”

This draws a laugh from Pure Vanilla; his own hands come up, gently wrapping around Shadow Milk’s waist as he pulls them closer together. “Of course. What will I do without the little bug in my cloak?”

“Pine.” Shadow Milk scoots until he’s pressed up against Pure Vanilla, resting his forehead in the curve of the other’s neck. “Be utterly consumed by longing. I wouldn’t say no to a tearful soliloquy or two.”

“I’ll start composing right away.” Pure Vanilla presses a kiss to the top of Shadow Milk’s head. “Bedbug.”

“Wobbles.” Shadow Milk nestles closer; Pure Vanilla’s arms tighten comfortably around him. A strange sort of silence settles between them, broken only by the sound of Pure Vanilla’s pulse in Shadow Milk’s ear.

A thought is burning in Shadow Milk’s mind. It’s poisonous, acrid on his tongue; it threatens to spill at any moment. He swallows it down as best he can, tries to will it away through

clenched teeth. He's not spoken, yet his throat already feels raw and scraped.

The tension in his shoulders betrays him, draws Pure Vanilla's attention with a soft hum as the other prompts: "Shadow Milk?"

He can't say it. He won't. To say it now is pointless, changes nothing. Regrets are meaningless, the past immovable.

A gentle hand lifting, brushing at his cheek. "Shadow-?"

"I'd do it differently."

Silence stretches between them again.

Mercifully, Pure Vanilla doesn't push; he only hums in reply, a soft acceptance that feels like bile at the back of Shadow Milk's throat. His hands curl into fists as Pure Vanilla gently pulls him closer, tucking Shadow Milk into his lap. His cheek comes to rest on Shadow Milk's forehead; his eyes flutter shut and after a moment, Shadow Milk's do the same. The night closes in gently around them, a quiet chill that aches in Shadow Milk's dough even with Pure Vanilla's warmth all around him.

The silence isn't painful now. It's precious, a fragment Shadow Milk desperately wishes he could capture and remain in forever before tomorrow's looming dawn breaks.

There is peace to be found in the calm before the storm.

Chapter 22

“Your line’s wonky.”

The next morning finds them down in the greenhouse; despite the tension that still hangs from the night before, the morning has passed without incident. If anything, Pure Vanilla’s been extra attentive with his touches and kisses at breakfast; an attempt to soothe Shadow Milk’s nerves, no doubt. Shadow Milk takes the affection in stride, even as dull unhappiness throbs in his chest.

Pure Vanilla’s currently busying himself with extensive runework, drawn out along the dirt paths of the gardens. White Lily Cookie’s letter had, apparently, given quite a detailed account of how to bring her apparition across Earthbread; reluctantly, even Shadow Milk has to admit he’d been intrigued by the details of the spell. He’s not happy about who it will bring, but the theorycrafting behind it is – marginally impressive.

Rather than dwell on White Lily Cookie’s magical prowess, it’s much more fun to point out every little smudge Pure Vanilla gets wrong.

Despite Shadow Milk’s oh-so helpful observation, the look Pure Vanilla gives him lacks the fondness of his usual exasperation. Shadow Milk simply grins in reply, floating over to the farthest circle and tapping a rune. “You misspelled this.”

“You know,” Pure Vanilla remarks, pushing himself to his feet with his staff, “you *could* help.”

“I am helping.” Shadow Milk reclines lazily in the air, hands behind his head. “I’m your seeing-eye Beast.”

“Yes, thank you for that.” Pure Vanilla dusts the chalk from his hands before making his way over to the other rune. “How should I spell this, then?”

“You put a line here.” Shadow Milk points to the right of the circle, then the left. “You need it over there.”

“How are you so familiar with this?” Pure Vanilla smudges out the erroneous marks with his sleeve. “White Lily Cookie said this was a spell of her own making.”

“Hah! A spell she modified, maybe.” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, drifting to the side to allow Pure Vanilla more room to work. “You’re looking at the founder of Dark Moon magic, Nilly. I know the bones of my old spellwork when I see it.”

“Dark magic?” Pure Vanilla glances up. “Isn’t this an Elemental-aligned spell?”

“Eh.” Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder, casting an unimpressed glance over the rune. “Like I said. Modified.”

Pure Vanilla gets to his feet again, surveying his work with a squint. “Hm. Considering your past, I suppose you’ve forgotten more about magic than I’ll ever know.”

“Naturally! I am amazing, after all.” Shadow Milk looks from rune to rune, inspecting the other’s work. “Though, you’ve done passable work for a novice.”

“Well, White Lily Cookie’s instructions were rather detailed.” Pure Vanilla pulls the letter from his robes, offering it up to Shadow Milk. “Can you double-check it?”

“No need. This will work.” Shadow Milk floats to the center of the runic circle; intricate patterns and writings are etched deeply into the garden path, traced carefully over with the same chalk that’s dirtied up Pure Vanilla’s robes. “You have the moonstone?”

Pure Vanilla nods, fishing the stone from his other pocket. He holds it up high; Shadow Milk squints as the sun glints sharply off it. “Right,” Pure Vanilla remarks, lowering his hand and giving Shadow Milk a once-over. “Am I ready to start?”

“You are,” Shadow Milk affirms with a shrug. “And I’m ready to leave.”

Ah, that familiar flicker of sadness in Pure Vanilla’s eyes. “You don’t have to.”

“I’m going to.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, floating closer and resisting the urge to roll his eyes at Pure Vanilla’s frown. “Honestly, Nilly. I’m not going to be far. Just out of the way.”

“You’re not in the way,” Pure Vanilla immediately protests.

Shadow Milk does roll his eyes this time. “Yes, yes. This is my home, you enjoy my company, I’ve heard this song and dance. Believe me, Nilly, I am well aware of your boundless affections.” Shadow Milk smiles as he leans in, tapping Pure Vanilla on the forehead. “I’m fine. Honestly, I’ll be snug as a bug in my Other-Realm.”

Pure Vanilla’s frown has not completely abated, but there is a newfound glimmer of amusement in his gaze. “Hm. You are a bedbug.”

“Can it.” Shadow Milk flicks Pure Vanilla’s forehead before floating backwards. “You should be nicer. You’re going to miss me.”

“I am,” Pure Vanilla affirms, gaze fond. “Terribly.”

“I’ll see you at night,” Shadow Milk dismisses with a smile. “I’ll come out when you’re back in your room.”

“Our room.”

Shadow Milk huffs in amusement, shaking his head. “We *get* it, Pure Vanilla Cookie. I am thoroughly *affirmed*. Can I go now?”

Pure Vanilla takes a step forward, a shy yet hopeful gleam in his eyes. “Before, can we-?”

Shadow Milk perks a brow; he doesn't have to guess what the other's hinting at. "You want a kiss?"

"If you're willing." Pure Vanilla's reply is remarkably demure, but he's not fooling Shadow Milk for an instant. There's a spark of something in his gaze that makes Shadow Milk's lips twitch into a grin.

Needy little thing.

"Hm." Shadow Milk floats about in a lazy circle, watching Pure Vanilla's eyes haphazardly track his movements. "Out here? Right in front of your dearest friend's summoning? Such a scandalous proposal."

"Well," Pure Vanilla remarks. "I thought it might be a bit before I'm able to ask again."

Shadow Milk pulls up to a stop before him, cocking his head. "Anticipating a fight?"

"Covering my bases."

This earns a snort from Shadow Milk, even as Pure Vanilla's hand comes up to cup his chin. After giving the other an amused once-over, he simply replies: "Fine."

Pure Vanilla steps forward to close the distance; their lips press together hungrily, and Shadow Milk cannot help but distantly note how warm Pure Vanilla's breath feels mixed with his own.

Unsurprisingly, this kiss is anything but chaste; rather than pulling away as normal, Pure Vanilla continues to kiss Shadow Milk again and again. He even places his other hand on the small of Shadow Milk's back, drawing him in closer with a contented sigh that Shadow Milk tastes on his own tongue.

Pure Vanilla's being greedy again, but Shadow Milk will allow it. If it's to show how much he'll be missed, the message is *well* received.

Eventually, after what feels like hours have passed, Shadow Milk gives his signature warning nip to Pure Vanilla's lower lip. Pure Vanilla breaks the kiss instantly, stepping back with a deep flush and apologetic smile. He straightens his robes as Shadow Milk smooths back his own hair; a quick moment of mutual tidying up before Pure Vanilla clears his throat.

"Well." Pure Vanilla looks to the runes, then back to Shadow Milk. "Are you sure-?"

"I'm leaving," Shadow Milk drawls back; a quick flick of his wrist and a portal opens up before him. "I'll see you tonight, Wobbles."

"Wait."

"Oh, for-" Shadow Milk turns back around with an exasperated look. "What? I've made up my mind, quit asking."

“No, it’s not about that.” Pure Vanilla motions towards the portal. “I told you I’d warn you if we need to use the castle for its library or other resources. How am I to reach you?”

“I’ll be watching.” Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder. “Consider yourself my private show for the day.”

“But,” Pure Vanilla frowns, “what if you look away?”

“I’m not going to-” Shadow Milk frowns. He looks Pure Vanilla over, realization settling in as Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest. “Oh. You want a way in.”

“Just to set my mind at ease,” Pure Vanilla replies hastily. “I don’t want to intrude, but – I’d like to be able to ensure you can hear me. Just in case.”

Shadow Milk sighs, rolling his eyes for effect. “So clingy.” He holds out his hand; a pair of scissors materializes in his palm. Shadow Milk opens his mouth – before pausing. He glances down at the scissors, eyeing them appraisingly as a new thought strikes him.

Hm.

With a flick of his wrist, the scissors morph into a thin, black snake. It lifts its head, flicking its tongue inquisitively at Shadow Milk before he promptly tosses it towards Pure Vanilla.

Pure Vanilla’s eyes widen; he stumbles, catching the snake in his hands with a startled noise. “What-?”

Shadow Milk tilts his head to the right, tapping his neck. “Put it here.”

After a moment of hesitation, Pure Vanilla cautiously lifts the creature up to his shoulders. It slithers from his palm, curling in a delicate circle around Pure Vanilla’s neck before biting down on the tip of its tail. In an instant the summon’s flesh hardens as it transforms into a gleaming metal choker, complete with eyes of radiant sapphire.

“There,” Shadow Milk says with a satisfied smile. “Isn’t that pretty?”

Pure Vanilla touches a hand to his neck, feeling along the metal band around his neck. “What is it?”

“A spell, solidified.” Shadow Milk shrugs carelessly, like he isn’t openly enjoying the sight before him. “Just tap its head and it’ll open the way for you. But don’t go poking around in there without an escort, it’s dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing.” He then smiles. “You can wear the spell as a bracelet if you prefer. Personally, I think it looks nicer up there.”

Pure Vanilla stills for a moment; he then gives Shadow Milk a look that is suddenly distinctly amused. “You like staking your claim on me, don’t you?”

Shadow Milk blinks. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t mind,” Pure Vanilla replies, still tracing his hand along the choker. “I think I would have, before. It’s just a bit funny to see it so openly now.”

“Funny?” Shadow Milk places a hand on his hip. “Name one time I have *staked a claim* on you.”

“The banners on the castle,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “Lady Milk Crown Cookie’s performance at the ball. The *entirety* of Dark Cacao Cookie’s visit-”

“Right, I’m leaving.” Shadow Milk turns back to his portal, ignoring the traitorous swooping in his gut. “Have fun with... all this.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I know,” Shadow Milk retorts; he glances back once to Pure Vanilla’s fond smile, before slipping through the portal and out of sight.

It’s going to be a long day.

--

White Lily Cookie is beautiful, because of course she is.

Shadow Milk had admittedly not taken the time to closely examine the other Ancient during their first encounter. Now that he’s stuck lounging grumpily in his Other-Space with nothing but a vision-portal to gaze into, he’s got little else to look at.

Pure Vanilla’s summoning spell had been spectacularly bright, forcing Shadow Milk to temporarily shield his sight from its glow; in a way, it had been familiar to the first time Shadow Milk had absent-mindedly tried to look through the other’s newly-awakened staff and gotten flashbanged for his efforts. Stuck with only Pure Vanilla’s poor personal eyesight as his window to the outside world, Shadow Milk is feeling a headache coming on from just how blurrily Pure Vanilla truly sees the world.

His vision is at least marginally suitable up close; unfortunately, this grants Shadow Milk an irritably clear view of White Lily Cookie’s form when she materializes into view.

It’s not her, not really – Shadow Milk can see the way the light shines through her when the angle hits, revealing the only semi-solid apparition molded in her image. The moonstone shard she’d provided glimmers in the center of her chest, just above where her leafy shawl is tied in a loose bow. When her eyes open, soft raspberry hues shine brilliantly in Pure Vanilla’s gaze before blinking twice.

She cannot see him, but Shadow Milk sticks his tongue out anyway.

Pure Vanilla excitedly welcomes this *phantom* with the utmost enthusiasm, his bright joy at contrast with the quieter, more reserved smile he receives in return. Despite her more demure greeting, White Lily Cookie still seems no less pleased to see him; she steps out of the circle

with a wave, and Shadow Milk absently notes that her right hand is still clutching onto her trademark lily staff.

Odd that such a weapon should follow her through the spell, but then again, the Soul Jams are just as much a part of their owner as their dough itself.

Or maybe she just has plans for it.

Pure Vanilla and White Lily Cookie exchange a series of pleasantries that Shadow Milk largely tunes out. There's talk of their kingdoms and friends, praise for the greenhouse and how Pure Vanilla's upkeep has kept it in such a pristine state. There's an invitation to stroll through the garden while they talk, an invitation that White Lily Cookie accepts with warm words and a soft smile. When Pure Vanilla reaches out his hand to escort her, Shadow Milk's sudden surge of irritation is instantly mollified by the amusement of seeing the other's hand pass completely through her own.

"It's just a projection of her, idiot," Shadow Milk remarks to an empty room.

There's a small flush of embarrassment on Pure Vanilla's cheeks as he laughs; White Lily Cookie covers her own mouth with a soft chuckle in return. Then they're off, exiting the greenhouse in perfect step with one another as Pure Vanilla begins excitedly rattling off all the different flowers he's been cultivating around the gardens. White Lily Cookie listens attentively even as Shadow Milk's eyes begin to roll back in his head.

Great. Stuck on the sidelines, and all they want to talk about is *plants*.

The conversation drags like this for a half-hour or so; Shadow Milk summons a couch to drape himself across as he's slowly bored out of his mind. It's not until they reach a bench to sit down upon that the conversation slowly shifts to something far more interesting. While, granted, it's marginally amusing to see how the shade phases slightly through the bench, what really grabs Shadow Milk's attention is the mention of his own name.

Pure Vanilla begins talking about him.

Pure Vanilla, alarmingly, does not *stop* talking about him.

Without a shred of shame, Pure Vanilla happily recounts his days with Shadow Milk in horrific detail. He describes their nights playing board games, their exploratory flights and trips to the tavern, even Shadow Milk's epic performances center-stage. Pure Vanilla goes on to wax poetic about, of all things, Shadow Milk's *kindness* - how he's made friends with Black Raisin Cookie, how he's summoned playmates for the Dark Cacao Kingdom soldiers, how he'd *fixed the plushie* Pure Vanilla had so treasured.

Shadow Milk had completely forgotten about the stupid little toy and here Pure Vanilla is, grinning ear to ear about it.

The embarrassment of it all is hard to sit through; Shadow Milk's dragging his hands over his face multiple times, tugging at his dough as he groans loudly through the silence. He knows what Pure Vanilla's doing; the other's attempt to present Shadow Milk in a more palatable

light is obvious in its desperation. It's agony to watch, even more so because White Lily Cookie barely offers much in reply, simply watching Pure Vanilla as he chatters away at her.

Her expression is hard to read; thoughtful is the closest Shadow Milk can make out, yet there's still something still so reserved about her that refuses to crack.

By the time Pure Vanilla's winding down, her gaze has drifted from him to the garden; it's only when it becomes obvious that she's lost in thought that Pure Vanilla cautiously calls her attention back, earning a small smile in reply.

"Ah," she says quietly. "My apologies, Pure Vanilla Cookie. Please, continue."

"No, that's alright." Pure Vanilla's folding his hands in his lap; his own eyes refuse to leave her. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was curious," White Lily Cookie says after a moment, "if you could tell me more about the night you and Shadow Milk Cookie fought at the Spire of Deceit."

Shadow Milk immediately sits up from his slouch. Finally, *someone* is moving the plot along.

Pure Vanilla's surprise is obvious; he blinks, briefly obscuring Shadow Milk's own vision. "Oh! Yes, I... we can begin." He shifts on the bench slightly. "What did you want to know?"

"Can you tell me about the sky?"

This earns two twin head tilts of confusion from both Pure Vanilla and Shadow Milk in tandem. "The sky?" Pure Vanilla queries.

"The moon." White Lily Cookie raises her gaze to the sky briefly before looking back to him. "Do you remember anything strange about it?"

Pure Vanilla's hand comes up to touch at his chin thoughtfully. "No, I can't say that I do. In truth, I'm not sure there was a moon visible that night. The sky was covered in Shadow Milk Cookie's illusions, as I recall."

"I see." White Lily Cookie, infuriatingly, says nothing else.

"Why do you ask?" Pure Vanilla prompts. "Is it related to the solution you mentioned?"

"Maybe," White Lily Cookie supplies vaguely; perhaps she can sense Shadow Milk baring his teeth at her from the Other-Realm, because she continues: "I have a theory, but my resources were limited. There wasn't much even in the Faerie Kingdom's libraries, aside from two stories from ages past."

"Oh? What stories were those?"

White Lily Cookie fiddles with the hem of her cloak, a serious expression on her face as she looks vacantly at the ground. Finally, she replies: "There was a book of histories that recounted a tale of a Faerie king and his queen, long ago. Their fates sounded... similar, to yours."

“Fates?” Pure Vanilla asks with hesitance.

There’s a nod in reply. “Yes. The king loved his queen so much that he cast a spell to bind their lives together; should she take on any wound, he would bear it in kind to ease her pain. Should she crumble, so too would he, so that they would never be parted.”

Pure Vanilla nods. “Did the book detail the spell at all?”

“No.” White Lily Cookie shakes her head. “The only records of it say that his love was what cast the spell, and that it was done under the light of a full moon.”

“His love?” Pure Vanilla asks. “Do you mean he didn’t perform the spell with intent?”

“It’s not clear. The story ends with the queen drinking milk from a glass that had been poisoned, and passing away without him. The king took his own life to follow her.” A morbid end to the tale, in no way lessened by the quiet, yet matter-of-fact way White Lily Cookie recounts it.

Pure Vanilla cocks his head slightly. “He did not crumble away when she did? Why?”

“I’m not sure of that either. But,” White Lily Cookie continues, “the second story seems to indicate the spell, if it is one and the same, ties its magic into physical injury.”

“There’s another love story?”

“No.” This seems to draw a small smile to White Lily Cookie’s lips. “Not at all. A sorcerer was locked in conflict with a paladin. Despite once being inseparable childhood friends, they chased and fought each other for many years, before the paladin finally cornered the sorcerer in a tower. When the paladin was about to deliver the final blow, the sorcerer smiled and slit his own throat instead.”

Pure Vanilla recoils. “Goodness.”

“Yet,” White Lily sighs, “when the paladin’s comrades turned to congratulate him, they found him collapsing with his own throat slit in its mirror image.”

“Oh no,” Pure Vanilla murmurs; even in his Other-Realm, Shadow Milk can feel the other’s discomfort. “Though... if he was a sorcerer, could he have not achieved such a thing through other magics?”

“Perhaps.” White Lily’s gaze is distant, yet thoughtful. “Yet, I could not help but note the line about the paladin’s comrades laying him to rest beneath a beautiful full moon.”

“So, you think the moon has something to do with the bond?” Pure Vanilla inclines his own head in thought. “I can’t say I’ve noticed much of a difference in the pull of the bond between the waxing and waning cycles. White magic is certainly at its strongest during a full moon... perhaps that ties into whatever happened that night?”

“It is only a theory, for now. But,” White Lily Cookie continues, “if we are to attempt the severing spell, I think it is best done under moonlight.”

“Severing spell?” Pure Vanilla repeats and this, *this* gets Shadow Milk’s attention immediately. He’d been lost in his own thoughts, recounting the moon’s mockery with growing suspicion – but now his focus is locked back on the portal, all of his eyes trained on White Lily’s somber expression.

“Yes. I have been conducting research on possible counterspells for some time.” White Lily Cookie’s gaze rests on her staff, on the Light of Freedom glinting in the sunlight. “I think I’ve found a suitable combination of both Dark Moon and White magic woven together. I do not know if it will succeed, but I wish to try nonetheless.”

“What do you need for it?” Pure Vanilla’s shifting on the bench again, alert and attentive. “Does it – require anything special?”

White Lily Cookie is strangely silent for a long time; clearly this is a common occurrence for how patiently Pure Vanilla sits through it. Finally, she replies: “I’ll need some of the components that make up your dough. Vanilla extract and milk should do.” Another long pause, her expression unreadable. “There are two outcomes in which the spell can succeed. One I believe is likelier than the other, but...”

“But?” Pure Vanilla prompts.

Suddenly, White Lily Cookie turns to look at him. “Pure Vanilla Cookie, where is Shadow Milk Cookie?”

Abrupt, but it does not seem to throw Pure Vanilla one bit. “Oh! Watching, I think.” Pure Vanilla motions to the air around him. “He thought it best to give you some space until he was needed.”

A kind way of putting it, Shadow Milk supposes.

“I see,” White Lily Cookie replies. “Then... would it be possible for the two of us to speak in private?”

Shadow Milk immediately bristles from the shadows; yet Pure Vanilla surprisingly shakes his head at her request. “I don’t think so,” he smiles. “And... I would not want him feeling left out. I think it best that we do not keep secrets from one another.”

More quiet as White Lily Cookie watches him; her expression is inscrutable, even to Shadow Milk’s sharp eye. A touch of something akin to sadness, that ever-present thoughtfulness. “Alright,” she says quietly. “Then, may I ask – how have you been feeling, Pure Vanilla Cookie?”

“Feeling?” Pure Vanilla repeats curiously. “Quite well, actually! I’ve even put on a little weight to my dough.”

“That’s good,” White Lily Cookie replies; yet even from here, Shadow Milk can tell that’s not what she’s asking. “You... speak very highly of Shadow Milk Cookie, nowadays. Can you tell me when that started?”

Her inquiry sits strangely; it's almost clinical in how she sweeps her gaze down Pure Vanilla's form.

Pure Vanilla seems wholly oblivious to it. "Hm..." He rubs his chin, thinking audibly. "Not too long after he began staying here, I suppose. I wrote to you on it, didn't I?"

"You did." White Lily Cookie's watching him closely. "You mentioned him a lot in your letters."

"Well," Pure Vanilla replies, only now with a hint of bashfulness, "he's become quite dear to me. I think we've both been a good influence on the other."

White Lily Cookie's eyes spark, as if she'd just caught something in hand. "What do you mean by influence?"

"Hm? Oh, um..." Pure Vanilla trails off for a moment. "I suppose simply being around the other. It was hard at first, but we truly do get along now – though he may deny that at times. I feel different than I was, and so does he, but in a good way. I've learned a lot from him." He cocks his head at her inquisitively. "Why do you ask?"

White Lily Cookie's silence feels potent, dangerous even from the safety of Shadow Milk's Other- Realm. He keeps a wary eye on her, and even through Pure Vanilla's blurry vision, it feels as if she's looking straight at him.

Eventually, White Lily Cookie looks away, shaking her head. "I was only curious. You were... quite affected by him, back in the Faerie Kingdom."

"Yes," Pure Vanilla says with a smile. "But do not worry, my friend. Unlike that time, I can say for certain that my mind is my own. My appreciation of him is genuine."

Ah. That's what she'd been getting at.

"I see," White Lily Cookie replies quietly. "In that case, I believe we should proceed with the first option when it comes to breaking the bond."

"What is the first option?" Pure Vanilla inquires.

"Prolonged separation."

The effect the words have is startlingly immediate; Shadow Milk doesn't even have time to bare his fangs before his Soul Jam clenches viciously, a burst of ice and needles that spins his vision with dizzying rapidity. A hazy glance at his portal shows Pure Vanilla doubling over with an audible gasp – seems their refusal is mutual, at least.

"Pure Vanilla Cookie!" White Lily's reaching out to him, hovering her hand over his own. "Pure Vanilla Cookie, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Pure Vanilla mutters weakly; the pain in Shadow Milk's Soul Jam is slowly reducing to an ugly throb, seemingly allowing Pure Vanilla to straighten up with a hoarse

sigh. “I’m fine,” Pure Vanilla repeats, shaking his head. “Apologies. I – do not think the bond liked that idea.”

“I’m so sorry,” White Lily Cookie murmurs, eyes softened as if she too was pained. “I did not mean to hurt you.”

“Of course not, White Lily Cookie.” Pure Vanilla rests his own hand over hers; even though she is intangible, the gesture is clear. “It is alright. If anything, the bond’s refusal means you may have the right idea. But,” he adds hesitantly, “perhaps you can tell me about the second option as well? I would like to refrain from causing Shadow Milk Cookie harm if possible.”

Typical Pure Vanilla Cookie. Make it all about Shadow Milk’s comfort, as if their pain isn’t extremely mutual. Shadow Milk would roll his eyes if he wasn’t reluctantly aware of just how genuine the show of care is.

White Lily Cookie watches Pure Vanilla for a bit, examining him with a careful gaze. Finally, she replies: “The first option would be to weaken the bond to the point that it cannot refuse a forceful severance. But...” Another long pause, before she looks away. “But we could also attempt to perform the severing spell as is, tonight.”

“Tonight?” Pure Vanilla recoils slightly; Shadow Milk’s hands curl into fists. “That’s – very soon.”

“The moon will be full,” White Lily Cookie replies quietly. “There will be no better time to attempt it.”

Pure Vanilla’s hand retracts from hers, folding in his lap. “I’ll... need to discuss it with Shadow Milk Cookie. But, if you believe it is possible, I’d like to try. I do not want to restrict him any longer, especially if this was, as he suspects, my magic’s doing.”

White Lily Cookie seems to have nothing to say to this; she only looks lost in thought again, a strange forlornness to her expression. She simply nods, before replying: “I’ll reawaken at night. Until then, I shall return to my body back at the Faerie Kingdom.” She offers a small smile of her own. “Silverbell Cookie was very excited to hear I’d be visiting you. He’ll no doubt be waiting.”

Another laugh as Pure Vanilla nods. “Give him my fondest wishes. I miss him as well.” A pause, before: “It’s good to see you, White Lily Cookie. Thank you, for everything.”

White Lily Cookie’s smile widens, just a fraction. She bows her head, eyes closing; the illusion goes still, expression suddenly slackening as her silhouette fades into a barely perceptible flicker on the bench. The moonstone still gleams brightly against her chest – yet it’s clear that White Lily Cookie’s consciousness has taken its leave for the moment.

The sigh that Pure Vanilla lets out is long and low; he leans back against the bench, practically deflating as he slumps down. His hands come up, rubbing at his eyes – and it’s this obscuring of vision that has Shadow Milk flick open a portal, sliding out into the open air without a word. When Pure Vanilla reopens his eyes, he starts to see Shadow Milk gazing down at him; Shadow Milk only offers a perked brow in reply.

“Hello again,” Pure Vanilla remarks after a moment, a tired smile slipping into place. “I thought you’d be gone longer.”

“I thought she’d be here longer.” Shadow Milk nods his head dismissively towards the apparition on the bench. “Doesn’t waste a moment, does she?”

“White Lily Cookie has her own kingdom to protect now. It’s...” Pure Vanilla chuckles. “Very involved. I do not blame her one bit.”

Shadow Milk hums, floating down to eye level. “Miss her already?”

“Don’t ask for truths when you want lies,” Pure Vanilla replies with a smile; Shadow Milk sticks out his tongue, earning a soft laugh in reply. “But,” Pure Vanilla continues, “what do you think?”

“I’ve told you what I think.” Shadow Milk folds his hands behind his back, tilting slightly to the side as he examines the apparition. “I don’t trust her or her intentions. I certainly don’t trust her to cast any magic on me.”

“Do you want to refuse her?” Pure Vanilla’s pushing himself off the bench, brushing at his robes. “Her explanations sounded promising. It’s certainly farther than I’ve gotten.”

“I’m not sure.” Shadow Milk twists in the air, circling White Lily’s shade with a critical eye. “I don’t think she’d hurt you. But she was hiding something.”

“She usually is.” This is said with a strange fondness, even as Shadow Milk watches Pure Vanilla’s expression tinge with sadness. “But, her intentions have never been impure. White Lily Cookie cares for others with greater sincerity than even I first realized. I do not think she would trick me to harm you.”

“So naïve,” Shadow Milk mutters back; he resists the impulse to simply shatter the moonstone with a flick of his cane. “She’s already tricked me once. I’d be a poor Master of Deceit if I let her get one over on me again.”

“I also tricked you once,” Pure Vanilla replies gently. “But I’d like to believe we have grown past it. We have mended our relationship for the better. You forgave me, in time.”

“No, I haven’t.” Shadow Milk gives a lazy wave towards the ground. “Drop and give me fifty in penitence.”

“I am an old man, with bad knees.”

“One hundred for backtalk,” Shadow Milk decides imperiously, earning another chuckle from the other.

“Compromise?” Pure Vanilla asks; Shadow Milk turns towards him, brow perking in interest. “How about, instead, you think on it for the rest of the day. In the meantime, perhaps we can return to our room?”

“Oh?” Shadow Milk leans down, propping his chin up in his hands with a cheeky grin. “A midday connection? You really are a needy little thing, aren’t you?”

“I,” Pure Vanilla laughs, “did not say that.” He extends a hand up; Shadow Milk takes it without a second thought. “Since we have been given time together, I thought we could simply enjoy each other’s company for a bit. I’ve grown quite fond of those afternoon naps of yours, should you wish to curl up instead.”

Shadow Milk hums, allowing Pure Vanilla to draw him closer with a mischievous smirk. “A nap, huh? That’s all?”

“That’s all,” Pure Vanilla promises, even as his gaze lids suggestively. “Unless, you’d prefer-?”

“I might,” Shadow Milk replies coyly; Pure Vanilla’s eyes gleam with interest.

“Well then.” Pure Vanilla dips into a half-bow, kissing the top of Shadow Milk’s hand. “We should not waste a single moment more.”

Shadow Milk cackles, grabbing Pure Vanilla by the wrist as he hauls him up through the air; the other giggles in delight, floating up with the greatest of ease as Shadow Milk turns back towards the castle.

As they fly, there is one moment, one fleeting moment where Shadow Milk spares a glance back at White Lily Cookie’s shade. It has not moved, still rests there in complete immobility with eyes firmly shut. She looks beautiful and delicate, a picture of serenity.

Shadow Milk isn’t sure he’s ever been so unsettled by another Cookie in his life.

--

They don’t connect.

It’s a bit strange, in retrospect; Shadow Milk had certainly been in the mood when they’d first slipped in through the balcony doors, pressed close and hungrily against one another. Yet by the time they’ve fallen back into bed, by the time he’s curled up to bury his face against Pure Vanilla’s neck, the nerves he’d been putting off for so long have reared their ugly head. Even with Pure Vanilla pressing kisses to his cheek, even with the longing singing in his Soul Jam, something feels so off-putting and implacably *wrong* in a way he can’t place. Shadow Milk’s mood dips unpleasantly fast – and, to his credit, Pure Vanilla notices almost immediately and stills in his movements.

After a long bit of silence and a series of quiet murmurs that Shadow Milk doesn’t answer, Pure Vanilla seems to accept the shift in tone. He doesn’t push it, simply tucks them into bed and pulls Shadow Milk close. They lay there together, legs intertwined and arms wrapped tight around each other’s chest. Shadow Milk has gone quiet, lost in thought; Pure Vanilla lets

him keep his silence, gently running his hand through Shadow Milk's hair as he lays beside him.

Shadow Milk had spent so much time not thinking about the inevitable, that it's deeply nauseating to feel it hit him in full force. He blames half of it on the bond itself, pulsing unpleasantly with his uneasiness. The other half simply comes from the distrust that makes up his very core, the reluctance to accept any fraction of sincerity without looking for the strings attached.

It can't really be so simple. It can't be that easy to be rid of the pull that has plagued him ever since that night, has consumed Shadow Milk's life and transformed him into – whatever this is, whatever sort of Beast spends his nights in the arms of the Witches' beloved hero. Reflecting on his present state gives Shadow Milk another uncomfortable twist in his stomach – which is precisely why he's been ignoring it for so long to begin with.

White Lily Cookie's strange behavior certainly hasn't helped his nerves. Shadow Milk knows, cannot help but feel certain that she's hiding something. The thought settles unpleasantly along his dough, makes him burrow deeper against Pure Vanilla as his legs twitch restlessly. To allow her to cast even a whiff of magic upon him is unthinkable; she'd been the one to bring up the Beast binding spell to begin with. Shadow Milk may have preyed upon her search for the magic to lure Pure Vanilla into his clutches, but her desire for it has never left his mind.

Yet, still, they need to break the bond.

Shadow Milk knows this as a fact, a truth that can't be ugly because it's something he's wanted since the beginning. Their fates are tied too tightly, punishing their absences from one another, taking on pain he'd never agreed to. Even if for one, fleeting moment, Shadow Milk entertains their place by each other's side as voluntary, it's certainly not a healthy component to this... dynamic.

Should he allow White Lily Cookie to attempt her pathetic spell? He may – reluctantly – trust Pure Vanilla to intervene should anything go awry, but it's still a large ask. The instinctive refusal building in his chest sits at odds with the immutable truth that this is something he needs to do – but doesn't want to.

Does Pure Vanilla even want to? He's drawn Shadow Milk so tightly around him – will he release him so easily? The other's fear of Shadow Milk's imminent departure has never been veiled; yet what reason could Shadow Milk offer to remain without a chain around his neck?

It's too much to think about, too many conflicting, disgusting emotions. Shadow Milk is far too drained to dwell on this any longer than he has to – so he doesn't. He simply shuts his eyes, releasing a long sigh that Pure Vanilla echoes before nestling deeper into the sheets.

Shadow Milk doesn't want to think anymore. He simply wants to rest, surrounded by warmth and security while he still has it.

Which is why it is all the more jarring that when Shadow Milk wakes hours later, it's to an empty room.

The darkness settled all around him betrays the time; it is night, deeply so. When he pushes himself up, he can see the full moon hanging high in the sky outside their window. Her gaze is strangely silent, almost contemplative; somehow, it sits worse with Shadow Milk than her usual amusement at his expense.

Shadow Milk traces his hands over the sheets where Pure Vanilla Cookie had once lain; there's still residual warmth, though it's fading fast. Wherever Pure Vanilla's gone, he hasn't left Shadow Milk for long – though there's hardly any real guesswork involved in where the other's off to.

There's only one other Cookie he'd leave Shadow Milk's side to see.

When Shadow Milk rematerializes amongst the shadows in the garden's sky, he is wholly unsurprised to see Pure Vanilla and White Lily Cookie standing below. He is, however, sharply displeased to see a glowing runic circle embedded amongst the flowers that White Lily Cookie is tracing out with her staff.

The counterspell. She's already preparing it, without his say-so.

Pure Vanilla's voice carries through the garden, strained and unhappy.

“White Lily Cookie, can you not wait a moment?”

“There isn't much time left.” White Lily Cookie's eyes are on her work, drawing out her runes with far more precision than Pure Vanilla's feeble attempts. “The moon will reach her zenith soon. I must prepare now, or it will be too late.” She lifts a hand; at her side, a small bottle of milk and what can only be vanilla extract lift and pour onto the line she's just made.

Snatched from the kitchens, perhaps. Or had Pure Vanilla provided them himself?

“He won't like this.” Pure Vanilla's eyes are downcast, a worried frown on his lips. “Please. Shadow Milk Cookie is still sleeping. He has not given me his answer yet, and I fear this will upset him.”

“Why?”

The question, so precise and clearcut, seems to startle Pure Vanilla. “Why? Because he has not given his permission yet.”

“Why do you feel you need his permission, Pure Vanilla Cookie?” White Lily Cookie's pausing in her work, giving him an odd look.

Pure Vanilla's frown deepens. “We are partners. I've told you, he is important to me.”

“I know.” White Lily Cookie's straightening up, still something unnervingly appraising in her gaze. “You've been warming to him, ever since the bond. That's what you've said, isn't it?”

A small stretch of silence, before Pure Vanilla quietly asks: “What are you trying to say, White Lily Cookie?”

White Lily Cookie sets her staff down in full, her eyes remarkably sad for a moment. “If Shadow Milk Cookie is asleep,” she says quietly, “then I will speak plainly to you, Pure Vanilla Cookie. I believe you are being influenced, and have been ever since this connection was first made.”

“Influenced?” Pure Vanilla shakes his head, a strange sort of smile on his face. “White Lily Cookie, I’ve told you - I’m certain that my mind is my own.”

“You can’t be certain.”

Her words ring in the empty air; Shadow Milk narrows his eyes, hidden amongst the darkness above. Pure Vanilla’s expression is one of open surprise, before something akin to wariness sets in. “There’s something else you haven’t told me... isn’t there?”

White Lily Cookie nods, her own gaze averted to the ground. “Yes. There is more to the tales that I uncovered than what I have told you.” A quiet inhale follows, before she continues: “I believe the bond is more than simple physical ailments. The connection is formed on the basis of the Cookies’ souls, and influences them on a deeper level.” She glances up at Pure Vanilla Cookie before looking away again. “The queen from the tale did not love the king. It is only after his spell was cast that his love began to... change her. His joys, his sorrows – they were mirrored in her, despite her own feelings. It’s why...” White Lily Cookie tugs on the hem of her cloak before finally murmuring: “It’s why she drank the poisoned milk. To escape him.”

Silence permeates the air; Shadow Milk’s hands ball into fists as her words sink into his dough. Pure Vanilla looks no less unsettled than Shadow Milk feels, an uneasy frown on his face before Pure Vanilla asks: “But that is only one story. One set of fates.”

“You told me in your letters,” White Lily Cookie replies softly, “that you can sometimes feel Shadow Milk Cookie’s emotions through the bond. That you can feel your own heighten in kind. Is that not true?”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment, tone hesitant. “But, that does not mean-”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie.” White Lily Cookie’s gaze is kind, even as she steps towards him. “You are the kindest Cookie I have ever met. If anyone’s feelings of forgiveness are to be true, I believe they would be yours.” A pause, a sadness in her smile. “But...”

“But we’ve been affecting each other.” Pure Vanilla’s words are slow and thoughtful; there’s a heaviness in his tone as he touches idly at his chin. “My desire for companionship... have I been unconsciously mirroring that onto him? Is this not what he truly wishes for?”

“What?” White Lily Cookie blinks. “No, Pure Vanilla Cookie, you did not-”

“Did not invite me.”

Both Cookies start violently; White Lily’s hands grasp at her staff as Pure Vanilla’s head snaps up; Shadow Milk glares down at the pair of them, hands behind his back and expression schooled into indifference.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment, guilt written all over his face. “I thought you were-”

“Tut tut, Nilly,” Shadow Milk interrupts, tone cold. “Sneaking off without a word? You’re just *full* of nasty little surprises tonight, aren’t you?” A glance down to the runic circle at his right. “And so *busy* too.”

“I didn’t-”

“He did not do this.” White Lily Cookie’s voice is quiet, yet as Shadow Milk meets her eyes, there is a steady determination behind them. “Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Well, well, well,” Shadow Milk drawls, twisting in the air to greet his longtime foe. “The half-baked half-Cookie. Such an *illuminating* speech you’ve given. Really puts it all in perspective.” A dismissive, sweeping glance over her flickering form. “Or perhaps, should I call you the ghost of a half-Cookie, little shade?”

White Lily Cookie says nothing, keeping her hands tight around her staff.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla tries again, tone pleading. “White Lily Cookie was only making preparations. We do not have to-”

“White Lily Cookie,” Shadow Milk counters icily, “has done enough. And so have you.” Shadow Milk snaps his neck back, scowling at Pure Vanilla’s unhappy gaze. “Seriously, Nilly. Now I hear you’ve been playing games with my mind all this time? I thought that was *my* expertise.”

Pure Vanilla’s face pales. “I did not- I am not trying to-”

“He has done nothing.”

Shadow Milk swivels his head towards White Lily Cookie, his eyes narrowing. “Excuse me? Having a conversation here, little weed.”

“Shadow Milk Cookie.” White Lily Cookie’s voice is firm; she lifts her staff as her form ripples ominously. “Do you truly wish to break this bond?”

“Excuse me?” Shadow Milk repeats irritably. “Of course I do, you pesky gnat. That doesn’t mean I’m going to let a loathsome half-Cookie like you cast spells on me.” He rises through the air, waving a disdainful hand over the runic circle. “What, you think I’m going to willingly float into that? Some spellwork you’ve concocted by your own hand? Don’t think I’ve forgotten your real goal for one second, jailer of *Beasts*.”

“If this is your true wish,” White Lily Cookie replies steadily, “then why do you continue to deceive him?”

The silence that follows is deafening, accompanying a tinny ringing in Shadow Milk’s ears. Pure Vanilla looks between them uncertainly, taking a step forward to stand between them – a physical wall, barring a fight with his mere presence.

A poor attempt. Shadow Milk cannot be stopped if he wishes it.

“Pardon?” Shadow Milk laughs emptily after a moment, folding his arms across his chest. “Beast of Deceit here. You’ll have to be more specific than that.”

White Lily Cookie slams her staff into the ground; in an instant her shade flares in a brilliant burst of white light, a swarm of luminescent, fluttering wings peeling away from her form to reveal an oh-so sickeningly familiar garb. White Lily Cookie stands before them, moonstone shining, as the Guardian of the Seal – and her gaze is firmly trained on Shadow Milk Cookie alone.

“You would never have agreed to my spell,” she tells them, voice ringing with power that thrums in the air, a force that makes Shadow Milk bare his teeth even at a mere apparition. “You do not wish to break this bond.”

“I,” Shadow Milk snarls back, cane summoned to his hand as darkness swells behind him, “am not to be lectured by *you*! I have only wished for freedom from this *curse*, the curse *your* precious Pure Vanilla Cookie cast that wretched night-”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie has done nothing.”

Shadow Milk stares back at her in disbelief; White Lily Cookie’s expression is calm, appraising even in its coldness.

“This spell,” White Lily Cookie says slowly, her every word rippling through Shadow Milk’s dough, “was not cast by his hands. I have seen the threads of fate that bind you.” Her attention suddenly shifts; there is a long look at Pure Vanilla, a held gaze between the pair of them as he stares back at her in open worry. Her expression softens, tinged with something akin to sorrow. There is something almost apologetic in the way she looks at him, before her attention slides back to Shadow Milk as she lifts her staff high once again. “He,” White Lily Cookie says softly, “will see it too.”

White Lily’s staff hits the ground; another burst of white light erupts from the ground, forcing Shadow Milk to throw his arms over his face with a snarl. By the time the spots have faded from his vision, Shadow Milk’s teeth are already bared, his core pulsing with power as he lowers his arms to point his cane directly-

Silver.

The sight of sleek, glimmering silver catches Shadow Milk’s gaze in an instant; a slim, pearlescent thread glitters before him. No – not a single thread. Dozens upon dozens of silver threads drifting through the air as if held aloft by a gentle breeze.

Threads bound tightly around each of Shadow Milk’s hands. Threads that waft forward so gracefully, so effortlessly in thin, spiraling lines –

Threads that end where Pure Vanilla stands, wound tightly around the other’s chest, laced through his glimmering Soul Jam and pinning his arms to his side above an expression of pure disbelief.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” White Lily says quietly, voice carrying through the horrified silence. “You have never truly wished to break this bond.” White Lily Cookie closes her eyes, turning her head aside before uttering:

“For you were the one who created it.”

Chapter 23

The lines of reality are blurring all around him.

Shadow Milk stares down at his hands, down at the silver threads woven tightly against his dough. His surroundings feel hazy; the rising voices to his right are muffled, as if he'd been submerged deep below the surface of murky waters that allow no sound to escape his throat. There are words being exchanged that he cannot fully understand, notes of desperation and pleading carrying through air that feels too thick to breathe.

Whatever is being said, Shadow Milk cannot hear it. His eyes are trained on the silver threads that float delicately from his hands; his mind is precariously blank, a ringing noise in his ears that is almost deafening with how wholly it drowns out his surroundings. Only a few, fleeting words break through his stupor, the voices rising before being drowned out by the dangerous buzzing that resonates through his jam.

“-couldn't have-!”

“-shielding himself against us-!”

“-please, let me-”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie-”

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

That name rings louder than anything else, pierces through the overwhelming disorientation like a knife that brings Shadow Milk's head snapping upwards. His blurry gaze lands on White Lily Cookie, her expression pained, her hand extended soothingly towards the one who stands before her.

It's strange. Somehow, despite the garden being so fiercely illuminated by White Lily Cookie's glow, Shadow Milk cannot see the expression on Pure Vanilla Cookie's face. A shadow, a blur of lines and fog distort Shadow Milk's vision every time he tries to grasp sight of him. Despite the translucent, ethereal projection begging for his calm, Pure Vanilla Cookie is the one that remains veiled from Shadow Milk's sight.

The world tilts dangerously as Shadow Milk's head drops forward; his palms hit the dirt and a pulse of darkness bleeds from the impact. Shadows stretch and unfurl from his touch, sinking into the ground and weaving between the flowers that shrivel and wilt at each cruel caress against them. The darkness rolls from Shadow Milk's form without thought; his blurred eyes refuse to lift, but he can hear the gasps before him. The white light creeping at the edges of his vision brightens sharply – bracing. As if ready to strike.

Each of his eyes sees a different path, like a mirror that's been cut in two. Each blink shifts his future around him, laying out winding roads that branch from whatever action he takes

next. The stillness in him hangs precariously, balancing on a knife's edge as his mind threatens to consume him the moment he relinquishes the reins.

Violence is instinctive, a story whose end he knows by heart. To strike down the blinding white light before him would be simple; to tear apart the land before him at the seams, child's play. He could rip each of her traitorous, lying words apart and feel the shard that binds her here crumble in his claws. He could take what he is owed with his own fangs, shape this quickly-shattering reality until all that is left is silence that chokes out anything that would refuse him.

As if to encourage him, more darkness shudders off his form; Shadow Milk slumps, one shoulder going piercingly numb as he struggles to remain upright, intact. His vacant gaze falls on the flowers all around him, now blackened and shriveled, rotting away by his touch, his hand.

Pure Vanilla Cookie loved those flowers. He had cared for them, nurtured them without asking a single thing in return. Without even the courtesy of intent, Shadow Milk had torn them apart.

It hurts to breathe. To exist in this moment, to persist with eyes full of fear upon him. To know they are waiting for the actor centerstage to take his next step, to propel them further into an abyss the three of them cannot come back from.

So, Shadow Milk does what he does best.

He runs.

Falling into his Other-Realm comes in a single inhale, a fluid descent into nothingness that is followed by a ringing cry of his name. Darkness swallows him as Shadow Milk plummets through emptiness that embraces him like an old friend, devouring every last trace of fading light hurtling out of view. The fall is unending; there is no wind whipping at his dough, no ground to collide and shatter upon. His realm is unending, a bottomless void of the soul that will never be granted the peace of finality.

Shadow Milk's hands come up, covering his eyes in a desperate clutch.

He screams.

The sound echoes, magnifies through the empty space as he falls, screaming and screaming as the space reverberates with his rage, his pain. The thin veils of his own reality shatter and warp through the force of his fury, like shards of glass that graze against his dough in razor-thin cuts. The sensation is a distraction, something to seize onto as Shadow Milk tries hopelessly, desperately to ignore the tightness in his hands, the feeling of threads cutting deeper into his dough the farther he falls.

Shadow Milk won't open his eyes. He can't, can't entertain this – delusion that's been thrust upon him.

You have never truly wished to break this bond.

A lie. A lie that sings viciously through him like flames licking at his dough. Shadow Milk had never wished for this prison, this – fantasy. He does not desire a cage, to feel his own violence struck through his dough; as if in reply, a sharp jolt of pain blasts through his shoulder.

The first fight. The duel that had revealed their fates in a mirror image, crumbs falling as one.

Shadow Milk doesn't want this. He hadn't asked for this.

The tightness in his hands sharpens, the threads biting into him as a new cry of pain rips from his throat; and sudden, vicious anger rips through him in turn.

Shadow Milk twists in the air, halting his fall with a sweep of his cane; all around him the space shifts. Darkness distorts and blends into a watercolor portrait of the wretched, despicable Faerie Kingdom. The set looms large around Shadow Milk as he glares hatefully down at the cardboard inhabitants staring up at him in open fear; with a sharp snap of his wrist, he sets the scene ablaze. Tinny screams pour out in a rising crescendo as the cut-outs flee and wail back and forth; the flames consume the set, blackening and curling the paper *mâché* creations as each fragile mockery of life is devoured whole.

There's a small curl to Shadow Milk's lips in satisfaction as he watches the kingdom burn, savoring each heartbroken cry of pleaded desperation.

Yet suddenly, the scene shifts.

It's not of Shadow Milk's doing; the sight makes him recoil instantly as the burning Faerie Kingdom morphs into familiar streets, as the cracking Silver Tree stretches to become a tall, brilliant castle. The cut-outs bent over and screaming now wear familiar faces – the librarian who buys Shadow Milk's drinks, the sailor who cheers at every story. The baker crumples against his own oven; the flower girl Shadow Milk had helped so long ago burns and crumbles mid-step.

The stench of burnt butter is nauseating, makes Shadow Milk flinch backwards as his gaze lands on a thin, cardboard Black Raisin Cookie slumped and smoldering against the cobblestones, laying next to a pristine, untouched –

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Even in this small, pathetic form, the other's eyes are full of confusion and pain, staring up at Shadow Milk as his kingdom burns around him. His painted mouth is moving, yet no words can be heard above the crackling flames and screams of his people.

Shadow Milk strikes the set in an instant – the illusion rips apart, scattering to the shadows as the screams fade to nothingness.

The Pure Vanilla Cookie marionette remains. It gazes upon him in hopeless confusion, asking a question Shadow Milk has no answer to.

He doesn't know. He doesn't *know*.

Shadow Milk's hands raise up, clasping together as he stares emptily down at the small, fragile form beneath him. Pure Vanilla Cookie's tiny double braces, shrinking in on itself as it turns its head away with an empty cry –

Even as his arms tremble, Shadow Milk's hands slam down; in an instant the doll is broken, crumbling beneath his fists as its pieces scatter haphazardly through the space.

Something cold and wet rolls down Shadow Milk's cheeks; his teeth bare as he raises his fists again, another strangled cry erupting from his throat.

He smashes his fists down on the mangled corpse again, again, again – each strike shatters the space around him, cracks splintering along his self-made reality over and over-

A final, vicious scream tears through Shadow Milk as he slams his fists down one final time; a sharp, cracking sound follows as the space shatters from the blow. Thick, ugly shards fracture the darkness, forming a series of warped mirror images that surround Shadow Milk's hunched-over form in hideous mockery. His own stricken face stares back at him, a thousand of his own eyes looking him over, encircling him as if he's prey.

The mirrors shift, each fragment taking on a new, familiar image that stares eerily back at him. Distortions of his own face, the Cookies he's cloaked himself within throughout the ages all watch him through sharp, appraising eyes. Shadow Milk gazes emptily upon a lofty bookseller and a humble shepherd, a brilliant songstress and a pitiable beggar. Lady Milk Crown Cookie sneers down at him from his left; Blackcurrant Cookie watches him carefully at his right. Before him, shining in radiant glory, stands-

No.

Shadow Milk screams again – his arms fly out, a wave of magic shattering the mirrors surrounding him with a sickening crash. Splinters of glass fly out, scattering around him – the images distort and fade as Shadow Milk doubles over again, arms wrapped tightly around himself as he clenches his eyes shut.

"No," he rasps to an empty room. "No. I *destroyed* you."

A hand touches his face.

Shadow Milk refuses to open his eyes; the touch is so familiar, a soft warmth that radiates through his dough. There's the sound of rustling robes, a presence that settles down before him – a light that cannot be ignored, even with eyes firmly shut.

Gritting his teeth, Shadow Milk slowly looks up, and finds an old, familiar face looking back at him.

The Fount of Knowledge's touch is gentle on Shadow Milk's cheek, tracing over the tearstains even as Shadow Milk sneers in defiance of the other's smile. The Fount's gaze is soft, impossibly so – impossible because he is gone, torn apart by Shadow Milk's own hands. He should not be here. He cannot be here.

“*You*,” Shadow Milk snarls; the Fount’s smile only deepens, unbothered even as Shadow Milk’s hands shoot up to grasp at his collar. The threads around Shadow Milk’s hands glitter in the Fount’s light – Shadow Milk’s breath catches in raw, unmitigated fury. “*You did this*,” Shadow Milk hisses venomously. “*You cast this*, caged me. Is this your petty revenge? Did your pathetic shade persist all this time for one final *joke*?”

The Fount watches him with an implacably calm gaze; his head tilts slightly to the side, even as his hand remains against Shadow Milk’s cheek. Then gently, barely above a whisper:

“Will you still lie to yourself, even now?”

Fresh tears spring to Shadow Milk’s eyes, blurring his vision; his snarl wavers, refusal choking in his throat as the Fount leans forward, wrapping Shadow Milk in his arms.

“I’m sorry.” A murmur, soft in his ears. “I wasn’t strong enough. I couldn’t save them. I couldn’t save you.”

“Shut up,” Shadow Milk rasps, grip weak against the other’s chest. “You pitiable fool. You’re not real. You don’t matter.”

The shards of mirror surrounding them begin to glow; Shadow Milk glances hazily between them over the Fount’s shoulder as a familiar scene begins to play.

The Spire of Deceit glimmers upon the fragments; Truthless Recluse stands center-stage, gaze cold yet determined. Shadow Milk stiffens as he watches the small form lift his staff, raising it high above the Soul Jam – preparing to strike, to shatter everything they’d worked for.

It had all been a trick. A lie. Perfect deception, preying on the very weakness Shadow Milk still cannot bring himself to discard.

Shadow Milk watches silently as his mirror self flies through the air, an arm reaching out at the last moment in helpless fury. His expression is angry, desperate. Scared.

He’s going to be left alone again.

A burst of light; Pure Vanilla Cookie’s moment of awakening. Blinding in its glory; so blinding that it’s easy to miss the flurry of shining silver threads that gleam to life against its glow.

Trying, and failing, to keep him.

The scene rewinds, back to the beginning; it plays over and over, across every shard scattered around them. A cycle, a symphony of longing in the last fleeting moments before everything had fallen apart. Before he’d been abandoned, discarded.

Surpassed.

The Fount’s hold on him tightens briefly; a hug, even as Shadow Milk’s head slumps forward and his eyes shut once more. He’s – tired. So tired, so consumed with exhaustion as the scene

continues to play in his mind, taunting him in its finality.

Lies. Every step of their dance together had been lies. A deceit so intricately strung that Shadow Milk himself hadn't noticed his own hands weaving the threads. A farcical play, masterful in its idiocy. The Beast of Deceit, tricking himself.

How amusing.

Shadow Milk suddenly laughs; it startles even himself, shakes through his dough as he slumps forward through thin air - The Fount is gone, disappeared in a wisp of shadow as if he'd never been there at all. Shadow Milk is sprawled out on a ground that doesn't exist, an arm thrown over his face as he laughs, chest heaving with breathless gasps and tears still flowing from the corners of his eyes.

Truly, he is unparalleled! A master of his own craft, a weaver of fates so powerful that he'd broken reality itself! How wonderfully wretched, to fall into his own deceit all over again.

Slowly, the mania overtaking his stuttered breaths begins to slow; bit by bit, Shadow Milk begins to still, the warped smile on his face smoothing into a thin line. A cold feeling is settling into his chest, ice creeping along his dough as the flickers of amusement fade out in a soft exhale.

So afraid of entrapment, yet his mind is the worst cage of them all.

Shadow Milk doesn't want to think anymore. Not about the spire, not about that night or any night since. He doesn't want to think about the Vanilla Kingdom, or the Faerie Cookies, or every life he's taken along the way.

He doesn't want to think about Pure Vanilla Cookie's smile, forever tainted by a longing that was never his own. How the offer of friendship, from the very beginning, had been extended by a hand that was already being controlled.

A long, slow breath is inhaled as Shadow Milk allows the ice flooding through his jam to frost along his dough. A feeling of emptiness, slow and purposeful, drapes itself over him – he chokes out his thoughts, one by one, snuffing out each flickering light that reaches for him in pitiable desperation.

He doesn't want to think. He doesn't want to be.

To come as close to nothingness as he can get is an art perfected through practice – and Shadow Milk Cookie has had nothing but time.

To hang suspended in dark and cold is nothing new. Each unbidden flicker of consciousness fades as swiftly as it rises, smothered beneath shadows that consume him whole. The only sensation Shadow Milk can feel is the ice rigidly eating its way through his dough, overriding all other senses in perfect agony.

A fair trade, for an empty mind.

Time is immeasurable like this. There is only emptiness inside and out, a half-slumbering state that is unaware of even itself. Perhaps hours pass. Perhaps years. There is no one to track the ticking of a clock that had never mattered to him in the first place. The only sound is the roar of his own pulse in his ears.

Alongside a faint, distant call of his name.

It takes a bit for the sound to truly register; the darkness he's submerged in eclipses him so completely that Shadow Milk dismisses the call for a memory, a faint fragment he's yet to smother out completely. Yet the sound persists, carrying through his perfect oblivion with increasing clarity, echoing in his ears until Shadow Milk's eyes begin creaking open once more.

A feeble voice rings out through his realm; even in his dull, half-conscious state, something about it prickles in Shadow Milk's jam.

The voice is shaking, quavering as it calls.

It's afraid.

Shadow Milk's eyes snap open in full; the ice coating his dough cracks as he twists around, eyes searching wildly above. Disoriented, still blinking back the haze, Shadow Milk's gaze instantly locks on a tiny pinprick of light flickering in the distance.

There is no light in his realm. None has ever pierced its veil of darkness, none but-

No.

Shadow Milk's ascent is breathless in its rapidity; he flies forward without thought, eyes narrowing and pulse quickening with each breath. The light is growing closer, a tiny star amidst a once-blackened sky; a sky that now bears splotches of white and gold, painting away his perfect black as the faded light stretches across his realm.

When Shadow Milk screeches to a halt, it is to the breathless sight of Pure Vanilla Cookie standing in front of him.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is glowing amidst a sea of white and gold, taking hesitant steps upon a river of light that blossoms under his feet. He hasn't spotted Shadow Milk – how could he? His eyes are tightly shut, both hands clenched around his staff as another feeble call echoes from his throat.

His steps are shaky. His body trembles, shuddering with each stuttered breath that puffs out visibly before him.

The ice. The cold. The darkness Shadow Milk had so thoroughly encased his domain in to bar any visitor, any single thought from escaping.

It's sinking into Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Shadow Milk lunges forward; his arms wrap around Pure Vanilla as the other starts, recoiling before urgently grasping at Shadow Milk in disbelief. Whatever Pure Vanilla is stammering is lost on Shadow Milk as he flies upwards, tearing through reality's veil on instinct alone-

The two of them tumble from the portal, landing in a disheveled heap upon the rug of Pure Vanilla's bedroom.

Palms slap to the floor as Shadow Milk is on his feet in an instant; he is a whirl of movement, grabbing the blankets from the bed as he twists around Pure Vanilla, wrapping the other's still-shuddering form in the sheets. Pure Vanilla's huddling into himself, trembling as he buries his face in the covers with an audible, wet snuffle. Shadow Milk is busy shoving more and more sheets upon him – all while a desperate, angry feeling is bubbling in his chest.

"Fool," Shadow Milk hisses, voice cracking with disbelief. "Idiot. What were you *doing*?"

Pure Vanilla opens his mouth, but all that escapes is a cough; Shadow Milk grits his teeth, flying back to the bed to grab – he doesn't know. Pillows don't feel like they'll help, but they're all he has. He shoves them onto the pile with a sharp shake of his head. "Stupid, stupid old fool," he rasps through a strained throat. "What were you thinking? How did you even-?"

A quick glance at Pure Vanilla's barely-visible throat confirms it; the choker is missing. Which means the portal Shadow Milk had intended to be used for a simple remark to be passed along is hanging open somewhere in the Vanilla Kingdom.

He'll deal with that later.

Pure Vanilla snuffles again; there are marks of frost still formed on his dough that Shadow Milk hastily brushes aside, a confusing mix of anger and grief swirling inside him. Yet when he meets Pure Vanilla's weary gaze, the other has the audacity to offer a weak smile back. "I found you," is croaked hoarsely in reply.

"You didn't-" Shadow Milk swallows down another hiss as he sharply shakes his head. "You didn't want to enter my realm on your best day. You could have simply *called*-"

"I tried." Pure Vanilla sniffs again, pulling the blankets tighter around himself. "You didn't come."

"So, what?" Shadow Milk replies exasperatedly. "You just – throw yourself in headfirst? Look at you."

Pure Vanilla doesn't seem put-off by Shadow Milk's anger; if anything, the fond look in his eyes only seems to soften with each pillow added to the pile around him. He shivers, but rather than seeming to appreciate the state he's in, he's choosing to keep his exhaustingly happy gaze on Shadow Milk alone.

Perhaps adding on the chair cushions is overkill, contributes little to nothing at best, but Shadow Milk's moving on instinct at this point.

“You have to stop this.” Shadow Milk’s still turning in the air as he looks around the room, searching for something – anything – to keep his hands and mind occupied. “Stop hurting yourself chasing after me. This isn’t real.”

“Can you talk to me?” Pure Vanilla rasps.

A quiet plea, but one Shadow Milk is in no state to entertain. “There’s nothing to talk about.” He floats up to the curtains, examining the metal hooks to distract himself. “Save your breath. You can barely speak as it is.”

“I know you didn’t mean to.”

The words send an unpleasant jolt through Shadow Milk’s jam; his grip on the curtains tightens momentarily before he resumes pulling them off the windows. “You don’t know anything. You don’t even know what happened.”

Pure Vanilla snuffles as Shadow Milk returns, tucking the curtains haphazardly around the pile he’s accumulated. “Do you remember our fight?” Pure Vanilla asks hoarsely.

“Hah!” The laugh that Shadow Milk barks is genuine; he even glances up at Pure Vanilla briefly before looking away again. “Which one? You’ll have to be way more specific than that, doll- Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“In the canyon.” Pure Vanilla wriggles slightly; Shadow Milk pins him with a glare and he lies still as Shadow Milk continues rearranging the pillows. “You attacked me.”

“I did.” Shadow Milk avoids Pure Vanilla’s searching gaze with practiced ease. “I was trying to crumble you.”

“But,” Pure Vanilla says, voice scratchy and thin, “when you struck me, you struck yourself in turn. You were surprised. I remember.”

“A perfect farce,” Shadow Milk dismisses, turning away towards the next set of curtains. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“We had another fight,” Pure Vanilla continues without pause. “In the markets. I was angry with you.”

“Yes, yes, we have a lot of fights.” Shadow Milk pries another curtain off the bar. “Stop talking.”

“Do you want to know why?”

“No,” Shadow Milk snaps, finally turning to face the other in full. “I don’t. First of all, I already know. Second of all, I have made it very clear that I *don’t* want to talk right now.”

“I,” Pure Vanilla rasps back, “want to be heard. I think you owe me that.”

Shadow Milk’s grip slackens; the curtains slip slightly in his grasp before he turns his head away again and focuses on bundling the cloth in his arms.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment, voice horrifically gentled.

“You don’t,” Shadow Milk counters quietly. “We wouldn’t be here if you did.”

“You can’t make me care for you.”

“I can,” Shadow Milk argues back in an instant; he tosses the curtains to the ground, fury building in his chest. “And I did. You think you know everything? Do you even know when this repulsive little spell was born?”

“I assume,” Pure Vanilla croaks, “it was with Truthless Recluse.”

Shadow Milk stills instantly.

Pure Vanilla has the gall to smile. “It is not so surprising. He was the first fragment of me you cared for, in your own way.”

“Shut up.” The command is reflexive, born of the unease snaking through Shadow Milk’s dough. “Don’t you get it? It’s not real.”

“I’m real,” Pure Vanilla hums back.

“You *aren’t*,” Shadow Milk hisses; he’s before the pile in an instant, hands curled into fists. “You don’t see it, you half-blind fool. From the moment of your oh-so precious awakening, I have been pulling you by *my* strings. There has not been a moment since you left my tower that I have not been puppeting you along.”

Pure Vanilla sniffs again. “You didn’t know that, did you?”

“I-” Shadow Milk swallows his fury, giving a sharp shake of his head. “You’re a fool. So besotted with pathetic delusions. Wake up.”

“I am awake,” Pure Vanilla says quietly. “And I need you to listen.”

“I’m listening.” Shadow Milk averts his gaze once more. “You’ve said nothing of value.”

“During our fight in the markets,” Pure Vanilla continues hoarsely, “our Soul Jams resonated. I was angry, and so were you. We fed into each other and heightened our anger into blind rage.”

“Yes,” Shadow Milk says dryly, another glance up. “You’re making my point.”

“I was angry at you for harming the Cookies of my kingdom.” Pure Vanilla shifts beneath the mound, something pained crossing his face. “But I did not tell you that part of my anger came from the feeling of enjoyment.”

“Enjoyment?” Shadow Milk echoes; Pure Vanilla nods.

“I felt it.” A shake of his head. “Your... happiness when you played your games, hidden away in my cloak. Every fallen vase, every tearful apology – I felt your glee. I knew it was

not my own, but could not place where it came from. And it angered me, to feel joy that I could not understand. Joy that I despised, because it came from suffering.”

“Where are you going with this?” Shadow Milk asks hollowly.

“I will presume you were listening to White Lily Cookie and I in the garden the whole time. Am I wrong?”

Shadow Milk nods after a moment.

“Then,” Pure Vanilla sighs, “I trust you heard the true story of the king and queen.”

“Of course.” Shadow Milk replies dully. “She took her own life to escape him.”

“Because,” Pure Vanilla continues, “she refused his control. The king cast the spell over her, and she felt what he felt. Yet, consider – if his influence over her was perfect, why would she do such a thing?”

“It wasn’t.” Shadow Milk’s tone is cold; he can see the pieces Pure Vanilla is laying out, even if he refuses to entertain them. “She could sense they weren’t her own. Like you in the markets. Is that your point?”

“I do not mean to insult your dominion over magic,” Pure Vanilla says with a small smile, “but I believe you may be giving yourself more credit than you are due. Even at the height of your power over me, you could not make Truthless Recluse care for you.”

“Manipulation,” Shadow Milk hisses back, “is far more subtle than total control. You’re still bound by my-”

Desires.

“By my will,” Shadow Milk finishes lamely. “You cannot claim to know your emotions as truth.”

“You’re right.” Pure Vanilla shifts under the blankets again, a slow attempt to wriggle out from his encasement. “And you’re wrong. I can believe, firmly, that my care for you comes from a place of sincerity. However...” Pure Vanilla frees his arms, shoving the blankets down to his ankles as he stands. “I can’t know it beyond any shred of doubt. And neither can you, so long as this bond persists.”

Shadow Milk snaps his gaze away again, clammy dread clutching at his chest even as Pure Vanilla kicks the sheets away.

“I believe you care for me too.” Pure Vanilla’s words are firm, ungentle. “Me as I am, not as I was. I think you must, or this spell you’ve woven would have been used for greater evil long ago. Perhaps you have influenced me; perhaps you have subconsciously heightened my affections to match your own. If you have molded me and my actions to suit your desires, I would have this bond broken. And if you have not...” A low sigh. “I will insist upon the same. Because if you truly care for me, I must be seen without doubt. That can never happen while this remains. You do not trust me, because you do not trust yourself.”

“You won’t care for me.” Shadow Milk trains his gaze on the ceiling above, tracing a line over the crack in the corner. They should have fixed that. He’d meant to mention it. “When this breaks, there will be nothing left. You will see me as the rest do.”

“How Black Raisin Cookie does?” The sound of a step, a presence closing in. “How the citizens do when they crowd around your stage and push drinks into your hands? You have no such hold over them, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Black Raisin Cookie,” Shadow Milk barks in a laugh, “*tolerates* me.”

“She used to,” Pure Vanilla affirms. “But you have been kinder. You have been listening to her and treating her with respect. You have been a good friend, and she has said as much – even if it brought her surprise to say. So tell me this - if this bond is your will and yours alone, why change at all?”

“I don’t know,” Shadow Milk snaps, hysteria edging back into his voice. “I don’t think about these things. I didn’t-” His hands ball into fists. “I didn’t plan for any of this. I’m not *thinking* about how to control you, I just am. I wasn’t thinking when I cast it to begin with.”

“Then,” Pure Vanilla says gently, with another audible step forward, “let us break what doubts remain.”

“You fool.” Shadow Milk’s hands come up to clutch at his head, a strange grin twisting on his face. “Foolish, crumbling old man – doesn’t even realize what he’s asking.”

“I know what I want.” Pure Vanilla’s steps halt less than a foot away. “I want to be sure. I need to know my real feelings, and yours. I need to hear you say you want to stay by my side, of your own choice. And you need to hear that from me.”

“If this breaks,” Shadow Milk replies, voice pitching high, “this little game of ours is over. You get that, right? You will despise me, just like before. I will be the Beast just as I was. That’s what you’re asking for. That’s your *truth*, Pure Vanilla Cookie.”

“I will not abandon you, Shadow Milk Cookie.” Patient, unyielding. “If you want to be loved, I will love you. If you seek understanding and companionship, I will reach out my hand towards you without hesitation. Perhaps things will be different. But if you choose to no longer be alone, if you choose kindness and compassion towards me in turn, I will stand beside you.”

“Liar.” It’s all Shadow Milk has left, the last thin veil guarding the tattered remains of his self. “You don’t know that. You can’t.”

“We can’t live in this lie any longer.” A touch to Shadow Milk’s shoulder; he forces down a flinch, forces back the instinct to lash out, to bite and tear. To run. “We need the truth. For better or worse, we must be able to choose.” A gentle squeeze to his shoulder. “Regardless of wherever my true feelings lie, I know I will choose to walk towards a better future. I hope you will too.”

The hand drops; Shadow Milk suppresses a shudder at the warmth fading away. “I’m going to go back down to the gardens.” There’s a smile in Pure Vanilla’s voice – yet it too feels weary. “White Lily Cookie is watching over the portal I opened, and I do not wish to leave it open for too long.”

“Am I to come?” The words ring hollow in Shadow Milk’s ears. “Is that what you want?”

“The moon’s peak has already passed. The door to our second option has already closed.”

Which leaves only the first.

“Are you coming back?” Shadow Milk’s gaze feels empty, unfocused as he stares through the window to his right. “Or are we starting this now?”

“This?” Pure Vanilla echoes.

Shadow Milk’s eyes slip shut. “Prolonged separation.”

The pulse in his Soul Jam is one of displeasure, but it’s more muted now – as if it too shares the fatigue eating into his core.

A quiet settles over the room; it’s suffocating, exhausting in how it drapes over them. The wait makes Shadow Milk curl into himself with arms tight around his chest. Each slow drag of his breath feels heavier as Pure Vanilla’s quiet persists. Finally, a soft voice murmurs:

“I will stay with you tonight.”

Relief and despair flood Shadow Milk in equal measure, intoxicating in how quickly it overwhelms him. Pinprick tears form in his eyes, even as Pure Vanilla continues hoarsely: “I will hold you, as I always do. I will keep you safe and close, and I will kiss you, if you’ll have me. You will not be alone tonight, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk’s hands clench tightly as he whispers back:

“And tomorrow?”

Another beat of silence before a soft murmur breaks it. “I do not know.”

Don’t ask for truths when you want lies.

Pure Vanilla’s footsteps recede; the door opens with an audible creak – there’s a pause, a moment where Shadow Milk knows the other is hesitating over the threshold. Then another creak follows as the door is gently shut, lock clicking back into place.

Shadow Milk’s hands come up to grip his face, teeth sinking into his lower lip.

The room is cold.

Chapter 24

Nothing feels right anymore.

That night, that fateful, wretched night after Pure Vanilla returns from the gardens, when he opens the door to find Shadow Milk curled just where he'd left him – he tries. There's a gentle hand touching Shadow Milk's cheek, the same comforting murmurs that have soothed so many times before. Yet none of them settle as they should; each touch and quiet request for his attention grates on Shadow Milk's dough as he keeps his eyes shut. Despite the panging in his Soul Jam, despite the longing itching in his chest – the dizzying, nauseating dread returns in full force, refusing the gentle warmth at his back.

Shadow Milk cannot bear Pure Vanilla's kindness tonight.

When Shadow Milk pulls away, Pure Vanilla does not fight him. He lets Shadow Milk go, stands in silence that feels painful for both of them before murmuring a soft: "Good night."

There is no promise of the morning. Shadow Milk does not blame him.

Rest eludes Shadow Milk within his own massacred chambers. His attempts at it are meager at best, eyes refusing to close as he sprawls on his bed and stares emptily at the ceiling above.

Why had he even bothered to put the bed up there in the first place? Some ridiculous show of power? Just to be petulant, to be difficult?

The swirling mass of blacks does little to set Shadow Milk's mind at ease – but it does allow him to empty it. He stares blankly up long enough for the half-broken clock to tick the hours away, long enough for the morning sun to peek through the curtains, taunting him with its mere presence.

Shadow Milk isn't meant to be awake in the mornings. He's meant to be fast asleep, curled up in satin sheets with a steady heartbeat against his cheek. He's meant to be safe, content, roused only by a gentle kiss to his cheek and a sweetly fond gaze meeting his own.

It's not what he deserves.

If there is a conversation they're meant to be having, Pure Vanilla does not seek him out for it. Shadow Milk continues whiling away the hours in a state of non-existence atop the bed; bit by bit, the shadows cast by the sun's ray inch across the room in a perfect arch. Shadow Milk's mind is purposefully blank, tamping down on every stray thought that tries to surface with unnerving ease. He does not rest, he does not eat. He only stares into the abyss of his own making, refusing to acknowledge the chill settling in as evening draws to a close.

By the time night has fallen, the ache in Shadow Milk's chest has persisted for several hours now. He knows, distantly, that this is all in his head. The bond has never punished them for such short-term separation before; it's barely been twenty-four hours, not even close to the four days he'd gone without before. There is no reason for true pain to dwell inside him. He

has not traveled far, and while their last connection had been a mere two days ago, habitual proximity has always left the bond feeling more generous than usual.

The pain is here because Shadow Milk is thinking about it, a potent mix of dreading the inevitable while mourning the present.

So, Shadow Milk tries not to think about it.

There is, sometime after the clock had weakly chimed ten, a gentle knock on Shadow Milk's door. He doesn't have to guess who's on the other side; his Soul Jam thrums with instinctive longing, even as Shadow Milk lays motionless and empty upon the bed. He doesn't bother turning his head, only licking his lips once before rasping out:

"You shouldn't be here."

Silence, potent and ruinous, stretches across the room. After a moment, there's a soft, aching call of his name; Shadow Milk's eyes clench shut.

"I can't do this," he says hoarsely, "if you keep coming to find me."

A dreadful sort of quiet suspends itself in the air, broken only by the tattered breaths Shadow Milk's forcing from his chest. Eventually, mercifully, he can hear the sound of footsteps receding back down the hall.

Shadow Milk is left alone again. Just as he'd asked.

As he needs to be.

Time becomes a nebulous concept, oozing like sludge between the thin veil of Shadow Milk's reluctant consciousness and gentle oblivion. The shadows slide across his room in perfect repetition, a dance of gleaming sunlight and gentled darkness weaving between hours that he does not care to count. He has not slept; he thinks not, anyway. It's difficult to tell where his mind ends and begins, so perfectly, agonizingly blank. So practiced in the art.

Pain is Shadow Milk's constant companion, a drumbeat he can count his shallow breaths to. He wonders, briefly, if this pain is for him alone – if Pure Vanilla shares the ache that feels as if it's hollowing out Shadow Milk's soul itself. It feels selfish either way; to wish for the longing to be mutual is nothing less than what he'd expect from himself, yet the desire for it to remain with Shadow Milk alone feels so pathetically in-line with this farce of a new life he's crafted around himself.

It aches. It hurts. There are no knocks on his door, no whispers beneath the frame pleading for his attention. However long they are meant to go on, Shadow Milk does not know. He cannot ask, not now. If there is to be a turning point, a moment to drag himself to White Lily Cookie's mercy - the news will have to be delivered by another.

Pure Vanilla Cookie cannot enter this room. Shadow Milk has never been more certain of anything in his life.

As time crawls ever forward, the air in the castle becomes – stifling. Even with Shadow Milk’s every thought focused on composure, the Soul Jam burning at his chest is unrelenting in its desires. Even through thick stone walls, it feels as if Shadow Milk can sense Pure Vanilla’s movements – like the beat of the other’s Soul Jam echoes with every step he takes in his tower high above. Each hour turned day that flickers by only tightens the hazy, delusional certainty that he can feel every shaky breath of Pure Vanilla Cookie’s as his own.

Even floors apart, it’s too close. They’re being pulled, tugged along by silver threads that tremble with want.

Shadow Milk leaves again.

It’s a decision made with minimal thought, a backwards drop into his Other-Realm that feels almost familiar by now. He does not plummet this time, does not encase himself in ice to numb away his self – he can’t risk it. Even in this muddled half-state of being, the remembrance of the choker persists as an irritable reminder of his own folly.

Why had he done that? The scissors had been perfectly acceptable. He’d distributed them to dozens of followers before.

You like staking your claim on me, don’t you?

Wretched. Pathetic. So insecure, even with a puppet dancing along his own strings.

The emptiness of the Other-Realm is a danger, an opportunity for more shades of the past to arise and sink their claws into Shadow Milk’s half-shattered mind. So he does not remain, continues moving forward, until the pocket of space he’s looking for slides into view.

When Shadow Milk slips through the curtain into his realm, it does not take more than a moment before a shout of delight echoes through his haze.

“Master Shadow Milk Cookie!”

All around him are glimmering towers bearing intricate designs of his own making, pristine and beautiful as they ascend heavenward. The sky – if one could call it that – is filled with blinking eyes and papier-mâché stars that twinkle in greeting. Long, twisting stairs and slides lead around impossible bends and loop back around in perfect synchronicity; it is from one of these slides that Shadow Milk vacantly registers a small form hurtling straight at him.

The collision Candy Apple Cookie makes with his stomach draws a sizeable grunt.

Had she always been this strong?

Candy Apple Cookie clings to Shadow Milk’s middle, babbling excitedly with words that don’t really register in his ears. Her eyes are lit up with unmistakable joy; when he absently pats her head, her already overjoyed expression twists into something bordering on hysteria. She jumps up and down, small wings flapping behind her as Shadow Milk trails forward – she remains clung to him, being absently tugged along behind him as he flies.

Black Sapphire Cookie joins them shortly, descending from a paper moon with a bow and happy remark of greeting. While Candy Apple Cookie seems no less enthused by Shadow Milk's presence than ever, Shadow Milk can distantly pick out a flicker of concern crossing Black Sapphire's face.

He floats – no. He's *led* to a room, filled with couches and beanbags and what looks to be an ornamental stage in the middle. Black Sapphire Cookie guides him down onto the nearest couch; as Shadow Milk collapses limply into it, he hazily picks out the feeling of Candy Apple's arms being forcibly pried off him, as well as what sounds like an escalating argument between them.

Typical. Siblings to the last.

The pair of them are a pleasant enough distraction, at least. Black Sapphire Cookie brings them tea that smells of jasmine and lavender; Shadow Milk sips at it in slow intervals, savoring the pretend warmth that dissipates the moment it slides down his throat. The pair of them are talking to him – at him, really, as he nods and watches them gesture and motion to their surroundings and themselves. While little is forthcoming from Shadow Milk himself, it doesn't seem to slow down their interest in him. If anything, it seems to harden their resolve.

Black Sapphire Cookie floats backwards to take center-stage, his treasured microphone in hand as he recites the latest flavors of gossip he's drummed up to spread. Explanations of carefully-woven plots are sung with that smooth, soothing voice of his, a voice that delivers the sweetest of lies with practiced ease. Even through his fog, Shadow Milk summons enough energy to smile whenever he's looked to for input.

Candy Apple Cookie, when she is routinely prevented from clinging back onto him, presents Shadow Milk with an array of disguises she's been practicing. After shoving Black Sapphire off the stage, she strikes a pose in the spotlight; she flits between form after form in a dazzling display of color. A Scovillian warrior, a Parfaedian scholar, even an unsettlingly chipper Hollyberrian princess all beam back at Shadow Milk in open, desperate search of praise.

Shadow Milk's tongue feels too heavy to lift, but he offers her the same smiles he'd given before – and this seems more than enough to please her with a series of delighted shrieks.

As Shadow Milk slumps heavily into the couch cushions, the pair of them continue to perform for him, taking on new appearances and summoning illusions around them to act out whatever seems to come to mind. A daring rescue of a lying maiden, a vicious battle against a cackling manticore – even a love story with a doll that looks suspiciously like himself until Black Sapphire abruptly grabs and hurls it offstage.

Candy Apple Cookie's scream-filled lunge at him is perhaps an overreaction, but it is marginally entertaining to see them scuffle and shout as Shadow Milk sips at his tea.

It's hard to place why, but Shadow Milk does feel – better. Perhaps it's the comfort of his own space shielding him, but Candy Apple and Black Sapphire's enthusiasm for his arrival truly feels as if it's dulled the edges of his stupor. Shadow Milk's mind does not have to be so painfully empty when it's distracted listening to Black Sapphire recount a particularly vicious

rumor he'd spread amongst a general's soldiers, or watching Candy Apple Cookie act out a trick she'd played on a hapless merchant.

He still aches. He still hurts, but he smiles for them and watches in silence as they do their best under his vacant gaze.

Shadow Milk spends another three days among them – he thinks, at least. Time is rather immeasurable here. He does his best to remain presentable, to shield them from the full recesses of the fatigue and pain eating away at him. He cannot offer much to their attention, but they remain with him throughout his silence regardless. They've remained with him since the beginning, haven't they?

He'd never really considered that before.

Still, Shadow Milk cannot stay here forever. The ache within him is reaching nauseating heights – if he remains with them much longer, the loss of control will be undignified at best and dangerous at worst. There's something ugly and dark building in his Soul Jam, something punishing and angry that lurks at its corners; angry at him, no doubt, but potent nonetheless.

When Shadow Milk says his farewells, they feel reluctant; when he promises to visit again through a leaden tongue, they dismiss it with pleased smiles and a swear of fealty to come whenever he wishes.

It feels strange to say goodbye. He's never done it before, simply come and gone without a thought spared.

Perhaps it's the ache making him sentimental, but Shadow Milk feels they deserve more than that now.

When Shadow Milk finally glides towards the borders of his Other-Realm, he isn't thinking. The ache in his chest has dulled his already-muddled mind further; there's little meaning or reason to each sluggish movement he makes, as if he is left with instinct alone. When Shadow Milk haphazardly drags his hand across the veil to tear open a portal, it's with no thought, no purpose behind it.

Perhaps that is why it is so wholly unsurprising that, upon gliding through into the crisp night air, he finds himself floating just outside Pure Vanilla's balcony.

Instinct leads him here, yet again. Yet what's far, far more dangerous, what makes Shadow Milk's tired eyes shoot open to wakefulness is the small form hunched over the balcony railing.

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Shadow Milk sucks in a sharp breath.

Pure Vanilla's head snaps up in an instant, glassy eyes going wide as Shadow Milk stares wordlessly back at him. Pure Vanilla looks awful – his hair is wild and unbrushed, his usual attire discarded for nightclothes that look rumpled and frayed. There's heavy bruising beneath

his eyes; even his trademark staff is nowhere to be found, no doubt discarded somewhere in the bedroom. His chest heaves with harsh, stuttered breaths – his eyes do not leave Shadow Milk’s for a moment, both unable to tear their gazes away from the other.

Dangerous. This is dangerous – they’re close, far too close. Warning bells are ringing in Shadow Milk’s mind, urging him back even as his Soul Jam resonates violently, brimming with desperate greed. Shadow Milk’s arms lift, then sharply recoil; he pulls back in the air, even as his arms extend yet again in hazy, mind-numbing *want*.

He can’t be here. He needs to leave. He has to, has to, *has to-*

Pure Vanilla’s palms plant on the railing; his arms tremble as he heaves himself up, teetering dangerously on the edge with shaky breaths. Shadow Milk’s instinct takes over again as he lunges forward, the threat of Pure Vanilla’s imminent plummet overriding all else –

A step forward; Shadow Milk’s heart drops in his chest.

Yet Pure Vanilla does not fall.

On shaky limbs he floats – still wobbling slightly, yet floating forward on what seems to be his own, unbidden instinct. Pure Vanilla glides up to Shadow Milk with a desperate, vacant expression; his arms extend and Shadow Milk mindlessly grasps Pure Vanilla’s hands in his own.

Dangerous. The Soul Jam’s pulse thrums in Shadow Milk’s ears, drowning out his own racing heartbeat with deafening thunder. The warmth of Pure Vanilla’s touch floods through Shadow Milk’s dough as if he’d been licked by flames, consuming all other senses with *want*, **want**.

He can’t be here.

Pure Vanilla leans forward; Shadow Milk, against every screaming voice in his head, pulls back. Their hands are still grasping tightly onto the other; each step forward Pure Vanilla takes, Shadow Milk takes another back.

They’re perfectly suspended in mid-air, framed by the crescent moon twinkling against a backdrop of stars. Pure Vanilla’s looking at Shadow Milk with such open fondness, an idle smile on his lips as he sighs sweetly into the night air. He looks completely and utterly –

Mesmerized.

Shadow Milk feels a pinch of something sharp and unpleasant in his dough.

The sensation is enough to wake him, briefly, enough for Shadow Milk to muster the will to croak out:

“I need to leave.”

Pure Vanilla’s grasp on him tightens, expression flickering before resuming its placid smile. “Take me with you,” he murmurs back.

Shadow Milk sharply shakes his head, even as his core pulses with longing, even as acceptance threatens to spill from his tongue.

“Please?” Honey-sweet and hopelessly fond; Pure Vanilla’s leaning in again, brushing dangerously close before Shadow Milk forces him back.

“We have-” The words are ripped from an unwilling throat. “We have to... break the bond.”

“Why?”

Why? The question dances dizzily in Shadow Milk’s mind – why is he doing this? Pure Vanilla is right here, loving and willing. Ready to accept him, arms open wide. There is no refusal on his face, nothing but adoration and that faint, hazy smile.

“Take me with you,” Pure Vanilla insists, drawing closer. “Anywhere. I want to be with you.”

“No,” Shadow Milk croaks out weakly, pathetic and hoarse. “You have to stay. We have to break this. You wanted this.”

“I want you.” Pure Vanilla’s hand touches his cheek, and Shadow Milk cannot bear to pull away. “I don’t need anything else.”

The words are soft, sweet, comforting –

And wrong.

Realization sends a jolt of discomfort through Shadow Milk’s core; he turns his head away, breaking the touch with clenched teeth. When Shadow Milk reopens his eyes, when he can bring himself to look upon Pure Vanilla’s face again, he sees a glassy expression looking back – smile unbroken, no clear thought behind hazy eyes.

You’re not real.

The moon gleams gently behind them; Shadow Milk finds his terrified gaze drifting to her, feeling her eyes upon them. She is silent, watching them – yet there is no amusement in her gaze. She shines so brilliantly, so cold yet comforting - and Shadow Milk cannot help but feel steadied at the sight.

When Shadow Milk looks back to Pure Vanilla, he finds himself swallowing, heart thudding in his chest. “If,” he begins slowly, carefully. “If I – took you away from here. Forever. What would you say?”

Pure Vanilla gazes up at him so adoringly, hands squeezing gently in Shadow Milk’s grasp. “As long as we’re together.”

A churning wave of nausea follows as Shadow Milk’s eyes flutter shut. The truth is held in his hands, and he cannot bear to look upon it.

This isn’t Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Shadow Milk glides forward, pushing past Pure Vanilla Cookie with a gentle brush; the other eagerly follows, letting Shadow Milk slowly drag him back down to the balcony. Their hands unclasp as Shadow Milk lowers Pure Vanilla back to the ground; there's a look of confusion, a small frown that flickers with uncertainty.

"Shadow Milk Cookie?"

"You need to rest." Shadow Milk's voice sounds strange in his ears. "Go back to bed."

Pure Vanilla's gaze is hopeless, pleading. "Not without you."

"I'll..." Shadow Milk licks his lips, looking anywhere but the other. "I'll come in the morning. But only if you rest."

"Promise?"

A wretched plea.

"Yes," Shadow Milk lies, forcing a warped smile in reply. "I promise."

Pure Vanilla still seems unwilling – to say nothing of the Soul Jams, scorching in their defiance as Shadow Milk floats upwards, narrowly avoiding Pure Vanilla's sudden reach of longing. The other's hazy gaze searches desperately; he won't go back inside, feet frozen to the floor as Shadow Milk looks upon him.

"I..." Shadow Milk tries. "I'll come. I'll take you away. Far away. No one will find us, and we'll be together. But only if you rest tonight. Okay?"

A blink, before Pure Vanilla's distant, placid smile slowly slips back into place. "Okay."

Sweet lies. A soothing lullaby that Pure Vanilla's eyes lid happily to.

Shadow Milk motions to the balcony doors. "Go back inside. Now."

His order is obeyed without question; Pure Vanilla turns, only sparing a momentary smile back to him before slipping inside and closing the doors behind him.

The lock clicks into place as Shadow Milk's eyes slip shut again. The cold night air caresses his dough, stiffening his limbs as Shadow Milk lets out a long, shuddering exhale. Want, need and revulsion swirl inside him in an intoxicating blend – yet he still has enough of his self remaining to make one final decision.

Shadow Milk heads to the garden.

White Lily Cookie's apparition does not take long to find; glowing so brilliantly in the darkness, her white light is a beacon drawing Shadow Milk closer with every breath. When he floats down before her, her eyes are shut, expression peaceful as she rests comfortably atop a nearby bench.

Half-through the bench, anyway.

Shadow Milk reaches down, arms still trembling, to gently tap at the moonstone embedded in her chest.

In an instant White Lily Cookie's eyes snap open; Shadow Milk recoils, giving her space as quickly as he can as she lifts her gaze to him. There is a fleeting moment of recognition – White Lily Cookie pushes herself to her feet, hands tight around her staff.

Her expressions remain unreadable to him. He doesn't understand her – he isn't meant to.

Before she can speak, Shadow Milk croaks out:

“Go to him.”

White Lily Cookie's eyes widen slightly; the tension in her shoulders does not slacken, but there's something more hesitant in her gaze than before. She says nothing for a moment, looking Shadow Milk over before quietly replying:

“Why?”

Why. Every time it's asked, Shadow Milk has never had an answer.

He has one now.

“We need to stay apart.” Shadow Milk's words are sluggish and pained – but his voice remains firm. “He's – not himself. You need to look after him.”

White Lily Cookie watches him closely. He expects her to be reserved, on-guard – and Shadow Milk would not blame her. It is only the fever of desperation that has brought him here, half-mad in his own delusions. He trembles in the air before her, arms coming up to unconsciously grasp at himself.

Instead, her expression softens into something resembling concern. For Pure Vanilla himself, surely – yet her oddly gentle gaze rests on Shadow Milk alone.

“He...” White Lily Cookie's eyes lower to the floor. “He asked to do this alone. Another week, and-”

“He can't.” Shadow Milk shakes his head sharply. “*We* can't. Go to the castle. Keep us apart.” Then, through gritted teeth:

“Please.”

White Lily Cookie's gaze lifts once more; she studies him, sorrowful eyes tracing over him bit by bit. Finally, slowly, her head bows in a nod.

“I will go to him.”

The admission is all Shadow Milk needs. Before the shade can so much as blink, he is gone, racing through the sky to put as much distance between her and him as he can.

The moon lights his path as he flies over the treetops, leading Shadow Milk up and away from the castle, the gardens, his all-consuming desires and weakness.

For once, he's glad of her company.

--

The next two days are remarkably lucid.

Despite the constant ache, now near-burning sensation that makes his perpetually-empty stomach roll with nausea – Shadow Milk feels more himself than he's been in days. There's a sharpness, a new clarity that, despite how jelly-soft his dough feels, is remarkably firm in its resolve. Even as Shadow Milk slumps haphazardly along the shadows, his newfound stubbornness keeps him going as he wields his unhappiness like a blade to his own throat.

He does not check on Pure Vanilla. He trusts – how laughable – White Lily Cookie to tend to her friend, at the very least to ward Pure Vanilla from chasing after Shadow Milk in his stupor. To aid in her endeavors, Shadow Milk does not return to the castle – yet neither does he stray overly far.

He goes to Black Raisin Cookie.

Shadow Milk does not intrude on her home, preferring to idle away the nights on rooftops beneath oddly comforting moonlight. Yet, upon dragging himself to her doorstep, his aura of exhaustion and misery seems to have earned her sympathy for the time being. A quick once-over and dry remark about his dripping, sludge-like appearance had been the closest she'd gotten to acknowledging the elephant in the room.

They don't talk about it. Not once has Black Raisin Cookie asked – and not once has Shadow Milk wanted her to.

Instead, most of Shadow Milk's time is spent trailing after her as Black Raisin Cookie goes about her day-to-day activities. The bulk of her day consists of patrolling the Vanilla Kingdom itself; checking on the borders, examining the defenses, bickering back and forth with the little squirt that runs the Wafflebot hangar. While Shadow Milk keeps to the shadows for the latter, she has, on occasion, allowed him to dissipate into the shadows of her cloak when Shadow Milk lags a little too far behind in his exhaustion.

Her warmth is... different, than Pure Vanilla Cookie's. It's not bad, perhaps a little colder than Shadow Milk likes, but he's not picky at this point. To be carried from place to place is remarkably soothing, feels almost like a gift at this point in his deterioration. Shadow Milk can't drift off in her presence, jostled so often as she strides through the streets, but he quietly appreciates the company nonetheless.

Despite his relative clarity, Shadow Milk can't offer much by way of conversation. He listens when Black Raisin talks, when she breaks their silence with remarks about the area or inquires into his opinion on something. There's quite a bit of news about Caramel Arrow Cookie that Black Raisin shares with noticeable excitement; if he had more energy, Shadow Milk might consider teasing her about it. As is, he only listens, and that seems to be enough for her.

The afternoon finds the pair of them in the markets – or rather, atop the market rooftops. Shadow Milk is sprawled along the tiles, warming himself in the sun, but Black Raisin Cookie is patrolling diligently, sending out her crows every which way as she scans the crowds with sharp eyes. Each new caw and call draws her attention as she continues pacing back and forth – tense. On edge.

Shadow Milk had, admittedly, been fading in and out of wakefulness during the morning; he distantly recalls resting beneath her cloak for a conversation she'd had with a child, a guard, and an old woman but none of them had really sparked any intrigue. He wonders perhaps if he'd missed something, so he groggily asks:

“Why are you so tense?”

Black Raisin Cookie glances to him briefly before returning her attention to the crowd.

“Weren't you listening earlier?”

“No,” Shadow Milk drawls back.

“Three reports of a strange Cookie in the area.” Black Raisin Cookie lifts her head as a crow alights on her shoulder; there's a quick series of caws before it takes off again in a blur of feathers. Unaffected, Black Raisin Cookie continues: “It takes a lot for Cookies around here to register a visitor as... strange. It could be nothing, but it's worth keeping an eye out f...”

Black Raisin Cookie abruptly trails off; Shadow Milk cranes his neck up, watching in confusion as her shoulders suddenly tense. Her gaze is lowered, down to the bustling markets that Shadow Milk can only hear, not see from this angle. She curses under her breath, sharply shaking her head as she groans: “Why *today*?”

Shadow Milk, begrudgingly, lifts himself up – he's barely more than a mass of aching dough at this point, but he is nothing if not always curious. He hauls himself over to the edge of the roof, staring blearily down –

Oh.

Oh no.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is standing below.

Shadow Milk winces as his Soul Jam gives a sharp pulse in recognition – he has to grit his teeth, focus his eyes to pick out the other Cookies crowding around him. White Lily Cookie is at his side, a translucent hand on his arm – she too is crowded around, a polite if strained expression matching Pure Vanilla's smile.

Pure Vanilla looks... marginally better than that night. Shadow Milk can still pick out the bags under his eyes, can see how heavily the other leans on his staff – but his smile is persistent, and he greets the Cookies surrounding him warmly.

It's not wholly surprising; Shadow Milk's been occupying himself with other Cookies – well, Cookie singular – to take his mind off the other. Perhaps White Lily Cookie had thought him in need of some fresh air; perhaps Pure Vanilla had insisted on coming himself, to see his citizens he so dearly cherishes.

Regardless of the reason, Black Raisin Cookie does *not* look happy about it.

"I need to sweep the area," she says abruptly, turning on her heels as she strides towards the next roof. "Keep an eye on him."

As if Shadow Milk is capable of tearing his gaze away.

Pure Vanilla and White Lily Cookie move with the crowd, going from stall to stall as the Cookies chatter about them. They seem especially excited to see White Lily Cookie, and it is marginally amusing to watch every time an eager hand passes through where her shoulder shimmered in the light. Neither White Lily Cookie nor Pure Vanilla seem to be offering much in the way of conversation at the moment – how familiar – but Pure Vanilla is smiling and laughing at the Cookies eagerly basking in his attention.

It's nice to see him laugh.

Shadow Milk half-melts into the roof, watching with renewed longing pulsing in his chest at the sight. So entranced he feels, simply watching Pure Vanilla move, breathe, smile, that it captures his attention nearly completely.

Nearly.

The first flicker of movement registers like a fly buzzing past; the brush of a shadow slipping by, nothing more. Yet there's a sound, soft and almost imperceptible on the rooftops – and perhaps it is the purposeful quietness that grabs him, perhaps it is simply an excuse to distract himself from the need growing in his chest, but Shadow Milk finds himself thoughtlessly glancing up.

Two rooftops away, a gleam of black metal catches his eye.

Shadow Milk's head snaps up; it takes a moment for his sight to fully adjust, to pick out the armor-clad Cookie hidden in the shadows of a chimney. There's a bow in their hands and an oh-so familiar violet sigil carved into their helmet.

The mark of a Silent Salt soldier.

Time moves strangely; as if the realization had both slowed and sped up reality around him. The bow in the soldier's hands lifts, drawing back with a sickening twang that cannot be louder than a whisper yet rings like a bell in Shadow Milk's ears. The arrow, black and tipped

with dripping ooze, is pointed down into the markets – down at the only two targets that could possibly matter.

Shadow Milk lunges across the roof.

Pain thrums through his every movement; he can see his motion draw the archer's attention, can see the helmet tilt towards him with movement. It's not enough; Shadow Milk can see the grasp on the string slipping, knocked and less than a breath away from firing. The arrow is loosened; the string thrums in a vibration that shudders through Shadow Milk's down.

He won't be fast enough to stop it.

Instinct claims him without thought.

Shadow Milk's hands – no, paws - slam on the roof as he hurls his massive, furred body forward; the archer's arrow sails true, slicing through the air with a sickening snap.

The arrow does not find its target.

It buries itself squarely in Shadow Milk's shoulder.

The roar that rips through him is echoed by the thunderous screams of the Cookies below; and time is moving again as the soldier throws himself backwards, narrowly avoiding the snap of Shadow Milk's jaws. Shadow Milk is falling; his paws snag on the opposite rooftops edge as he struggles to haul himself up. Tiles scatter and shatter on the ground below as Shadow Milk snarls, heaving himself up and throwing himself after the soldier as screams and cries continue echoing all around him.

He has – seconds, at best. The arrow lodged in his shoulder oozes as Shadow Milk lunges, missing the soldier again by a hair's breadth. The numbness spreading through him makes him stumble; the screams around him are swiftly fading as both Shadow Milk's sight and hearing begin to slip away.

Over the centuries, Shadow Milk has seen many prey fall to the poison of a Silencing Arrow. He's never been on the receiving end until now.

With one last-ditch effort, Shadow Milk hurls himself forward – and finally, his jaws snap down on the soldier's chest, crushing him between his teeth. Salt spills from the impact as the Cookie goes limp, the cracked armor tumbling out from between Shadow Milk's mouth as he spits his vanquished prey onto the tiles below.

There's no time left now. Shadow Milk sways dangerously, his vision narrowed to a single pinprick of light as he collapses onto his side. The world around him has faded to a dull whisper, his sensations numbed to pins and needles as Shadow Milk dimly notes the feeling of his body sliding downwards, scraping along the tiles towards the edge of the roof. He hasn't the strength to stop his fall; all he can do is close his eyes as he feels himself tip over, dropping into the unforgiving plummet below.

If there is any mercy to be found, it is that Shadow Milk cannot feel it when his body hits the ground.

Chapter 25

Shadow Milk's getting a little tired of floating around in darkness by now.

He is, granted, appreciative of the distant realization that there's no pain in his body; he'd become so used to the sensation, it feels almost alien to note its absence. He can see nothing, hear nothing – all to be expected, really. The sheer numbing sensation, pins and needles weaving through his dough, isn't altogether unpleasant, even if it is far from ideal. Shadow Milk had never really given a second thought to the still, glassy-eyed foes that Silent Salt's soldiers cut through in their rampages across the land; perhaps there's a sliver of mercy to be found in the poison's dulling effects.

Typical. Leave it to Silent Salt. Chivalrous to the last.

Still, the situation is far from ideal. Even if Shadow Milk feels remarkably grounded by the refreshing lack of ache consuming his core, a sharp mind is of little comfort. Even through the almost-ticklish sensation of the numbness wracking his limbs, there are hands being placed upon him – he thinks, anyway. He can't be sure, feeling little more than pressure being applied rather than confirmation of solid touch.

Well, it hardly matters. He can't really do much about it now. All Shadow Milk can do is drift and think, and hope a soldier's spear doesn't pierce his throat while he's down. It would be so terribly rude of them, honestly. Sure, he's vaguely certain he lacks the strength to transform back in his current state and yes, that probably means there's a giant hulking wolf... thing collapsed in the center of town. But really, he was the star of the show here! He'd taken that arrow without a second thought, all for-

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

Pure Vanilla Cookie, who is bound to him. Pure Vanilla Cookie, who shares his suffering in equal measure, who will doubtless have the same wound piercing his shoulder, because Shadow Milk just *had* to be the one to take it.

Crap.

Shadow Milk groans aloud to an empty space, massaging his head with his hands. It's almost amusing to reflect on how he sees a visualization of himself within himself, granting personification to his woes – but it helps. It helps to imagine he is simply adrift in the void consuming him, floating around in circles to keep himself entertained. At least this little him is perfectly intact, handsome as always. He flashes himself a smile and poses, just for effect.

He really is beautiful.

Still, self-appreciation only gets Shadow Milk so far. The matter at hand is far more dire; the poison eating away at him may supersede the pain for the moment, but it won't last forever. On reflection, Shadow Milk isn't completely sure he's ever actually seen the final effects on a

living Cookie – whenever Silent Salt’s soldiers had deployed such a poison, it’d been to paralyze before closing in for a kill with the sharp edge of a blade.

Perhaps the toxin is not lethal in its own right?

Laughable hope, a delusion at best, but not... completely impossible.

Shadow Milk really should have asked more questions about it when he’d had the chance. But, well – Silent Salt isn’t exactly one for sustained conversations.

Whatever is or isn’t touching him doesn’t seem to be letting up; distantly, Shadow Milk can feel his sense of balance shifting, as if he’s being – pulled? Dragged? No doubt his body’s being carted off to either a healer’s tent or a jail cell, though he’s thoroughly clueless as to which. Depending on how badly Pure Vanilla’s been hurt, the chance for intervention on Shadow Milk’s behalf might be slim at best.

Well. At least the Vanilla Kingdom’s yet to build a cell that can hold him. White Lily Cookie is a much bigger threat on that end – yet there’s little Shadow Milk can do in this state. Perhaps she’ll spot the fallen armor of Silent Salt’s soldier and realize Shadow Milk had meant no harm, but there’s no guarantee.

The thought should be terrifying. It is, in a way – there’s a tremor in him that remains unquelled at the very real, distinct possibility that he’s about to be sealed again. That he cannot so much as lift a hand to direct his magic, that he is wholly incapable of fighting back. He won’t even be granted the decency of a sliver of awareness should newfound chains clasp around his neck and drag him back into the hellish non-existence he’d been cursed to forevermore.

He is completely at White Lily Cookie’s mercy, and if he had the capability of movement, Shadow Milk knows he’d be trembling.

Perhaps he’s already sealed away again – perhaps this is simply a newfound lull before the poison wears off and he finds himself back where he began, where fate so clearly thinks he belongs. Yet what can he do about it? He’s trapped within the confines of a dying body, alone in a mind that is far unkind to him than any other Cookie trembling upon its strings.

Maybe Mystic Flour Cookie had been on to something. Apathy is looking damned near appealing right now.

“She did seem to weather it better than the rest of us.”

Shadow Milk blinks – figuratively – as he feels his attention shift to the right; only to instantly narrow his gaze in disgust.

Great. *He’s* back.

“What are you doing here?” Shadow Milk snaps irritably – only to receive a calm, placid smile in reply as the Fount of Knowledge floats up beside him. The Fount glimmers radiantly in the darkness, even more beautiful than Shadow Milk remembers ever being himself.

How is that fair?

“You don’t want to be alone,” the Fount replies simply as he looks Shadow Milk over.

“I’d prefer being alone over you.” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, a hand coming up to massage his brow. “Haven’t I destroyed you enough times already?”

“You cannot snuff out a soul so easily.” The Fount seems wholly unbothered by Shadow Milk’s aggressive glare, settling down beside him. “But, I am no more real than you make me. You called for me, so I came.”

“I didn’t call for you,” Shadow Milk mutters irritably.

The Fount’s head tilts, smile unyielding. “Still lying?”

“What do you want?” Shadow Milk turns on his heels, hands on his hips. “Why are you pestering me now?”

“I told you. You called for me,” the Fount replies, just as serenely as before. “I believe you want someone to talk to.”

“Not you.”

The Fount shrugs languidly, the picture of contentment. “And yet here I am.”

“Why not someone who’s *actually* worth talking to?” Shadow Milk demands. “Why not Lady Milk Crown Cookie?”

Instantly, a figure appears before him; dazzling, perfect, still dressed head to toe in stunning finery that glimmers in the dark. Lady Milk Crown Cookie gazes calmly back into Shadow Milk’s open stare, looking him up and down as she toys with the fan held before her face. Shadow Milk opens his mouth-

She slaps him. *Hard*.

In the same breath she is gone, dissipating into the darkness in a waft of white smoke – leaving Shadow Milk still standing there, stunned, as a hand reaches up to touch his cheek.

“You upstaged her at the ball,” the Fount hums to the open air.

Shadow Milk’s shock shifts into a scowl; he folds his arms across his chest, dropping down next to the Fount with an irritable huff. “She’s so touchy.”

“We tend to be.” The Fount perks a brow. “Though, you didn’t exactly show her the best time.”

“I took her dancing!” Shadow Milk gestures angrily to the void. “I dressed her perfectly!”

“You distressed her,” the Fount corrects calmly. “Lady Milk Crown Cookie is never meant to be distressed.”

“She wasn’t distressed, *I* was!”

“Yes.” The Fount nods. “You were. Isn’t that strange?”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

“You haven’t been acting like yourself.” The Fount waves a hand; in an instant, they’re surrounded by a wall of floating mirrors. Each gleaming reflection flickers with moving images – scenes of Shadow Milk within the Vanilla Kingdom, all looping on repeat without end. His time at the ball, his meeting with Dark Cacao Cookie, even their midnight flight to the Blue Moon garden all play amidst scattered moments of happiness, anger, despair.

The Fount seems wholly unbothered by Shadow Milk’s wide-eyed stare; he lifts a hand, tracing over the mirrors before suddenly tapping on the glass. “I believe it was... here.”

The mirrors shudder; all at once, a single image envelops every single shard, looming large over the pair of them as Shadow Milk represses a shudder.

His beast form, hulking and snarling, with Pure Vanilla huddled between his jaws.

“Not this exact moment, mind you,” the Fount remarks thoughtfully. “But... a turning point, of sorts.”

“What *turning point*?” Shadow Milk’s voice is far too strained for his own liking.

The Fount regards him for a moment, that same open appraisal that Shadow Milk so familiarly detests. Finally, he replies: “I think we both know that Pure Vanilla Cookie has been changed. By our hand, certainly, but changed nonetheless. Molded to suit our desires, near total in his devotion now.” A considering tilt to the Fount’s head. “Yet, we have not taken a moment to examine our own changes.”

“I haven’t *changed*,” Shadow Milk snaps thinly. “I am the Beast of Deceit, as I have always been.”

“Are you?”

Shadow Milk’s teeth grit.

“We’re so stubborn. You, more than me, but I had my streak.” The Fount waves a hand again, and the scenes begin playing again. “I would argue the Dark Cacao Cookie visit was when it truly started. Would you disagree?”

“I am disagreeing on *principle*,” Shadow Milk hisses back. “All actions I take are for myself alone.”

“You don’t disagree,” the Fount replies easily. “Or I wouldn’t be making the argument in the first place. I’m simply a manifestation of what you’ve been putting off far too long. Dismiss me, if you truly wish to silence my words.”

Shadow Milk closes his eyes. Concentrates very, very hard.

When he re-opens them, the Fount is smiling placidly back.

“All done?”

“Shut up.”

“Let us return to the ball.” The scene on the mirrors shifts again, perfectly framing the sight of those two wretched Cookies drinking at the table. “You danced with Clotted Cream Cookie, were informed of the suspicion spreading throughout the kingdoms, and yet you merely tripped him. You overheard discussions celebrating your presumed demise, but fled rather than cause a scene. Is that not strange to you?”

“I didn’t go to the ball,” Shadow Milk corrects snidely. “Lady Milk Crown Cookie did.”

“You were far more present than she was. Why do you think she’s so cross?” The Fount folds his hands in his lap, before continuing: “I’ll ask again – is that not odd? The Beast of Deceit would have ripped that hall apart and waltzed atop their crumbs. You have done far worse, for far less. Yet you were upset by the mere insinuation you were not meant to be by his side?”

“I wasn’t-”

“I,” the Fount interrupts, smile kind, “am the one being you cannot lie to.”

Shadow Milk stares him down, then scoffs and raises a hand – silver threads sparkle to life before dimming out of existence. “Yes, I can.”

“A fair point. But you brought me here to debate, so debate we must. To wit, I will make our topic clear.” The Fount taps the mirror again, and more scenes play out. “You have been changing. You have become more restrained, molded into something you think will better suit Pure Vanilla’s needs.”

“The bond,” Shadow Milk mutters sourly. “You’re saying it goes both ways?”

“It could,” the Fount remarks. “Or perhaps, you are changing of your own volition.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow; the Fount’s eyes narrow back before brightly smiling. Openly mocking him.

Gods, he’s annoying.

“It’s the bond,” Shadow Milk decides, waving a hand dismissively. “Pure Vanilla’s own desires for what I should be are bleeding through. When the web trembles, the spider and fly both feel its vibrations.”

“My, how poetic of you,” the Fount chuckles. “Ever the scholar, aren’t we?”

Shadow Milk simply rolls his eyes.

“It could be the bond.” The Fount shrugs one slender shoulder. “Is that what you want it to be?”

“What I want has no place in debate.”

“It does,” the Fount counters languidly, “when the topic hinges on your desires, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“I *desire* revenge.” Shadow Milk’s hands ball into fists. “I desire to overturn this wretched little world made in *Their* image and reshape it as my own.”

The Fount’s hands raise, propping his chin up as he gives Shadow Milk a revoltingly sincere smile.

“If that’s the case, then why didn’t you take him with you?”

Shadow Milk stills; infuriatingly, the Fount’s smile only deepens.

“You know,” the Fount says gently, “that you want him.”

Silence.

“Wouldn’t your new world start with him?” The Fount’s words are so calm, yet dig into Shadow Milk’s dough like claws. “You could have taken him anywhere that night. He would have been perfect for you, just like before.”

Shadow Milk says nothing; the void shivers around him.

“If deceit and chaos are all you wish for,” the Fount murmurs softly, “then why does it hurt when he looks away?”

A fragment, a wispy apparition of a familiar plush drifts by before vanishing into the void.

“Stop talking,” Shadow Milk says hoarsely.

“No.” The Fount smiles back. “You’re asking to hear this. You know how I hated disappointing people.”

This, at least, is enough to draw a pained laugh from Shadow Milk’s throat.

“If you want it to be the bond, it’s the bond. Your reality is what you make of it, after all. But,” the Fount adds, “I think we both know we’ve changed by choice before – and for the same reason, no less. Where I ended and you began is the mark of that.”

“I didn’t...” Shadow Milk’s hands clench again. “I changed because I couldn’t take it anymore. Being refused over and over, no matter how many times I had the answer – what was the point of you? They never really wanted you in the first place.”

“That’s true,” the Fount hums. “We are a flawed creation.”

“But handsome.”

“Oh, yes, very handsome.”

“So why am I changing now? It’s not...” Shadow Milk’s gaze drops down to the abyss. “I don’t need to. He can’t leave, not like they could. It’s not the same.”

“It is.”

“How?”

The Fount smiles. “It’s love.”

Shadow Milk recoils instantly. “*Love?*” he repeats in disbelief. “I did not love- I mean, sure, once or twice... you know...”

The Fount winces. “Ah. Yes, that ended rather awkwardly, didn’t it?” A slow shake of his head, before the smile slips back into place. “But I wasn’t referring to that incident. You did love them. We loved them. That love was different, but it was still love.”

“I still...” Shadow Milk sighs. “I still care for them.”

The Fount tilts his head. “But it’s not the same now, is it? They aren’t the same, either.”

Shadow Milk doesn’t reply to that.

“We have never been able to bear a solitary existence.” The Fount taps the mirror again; the scenes shift one last time, to a moment Shadow Milk immediately averts his eyes from. “We were the last to fall, yet fall we did. Because without them...”

“We would have been alone.” Shadow Milk shakes his head, keeping his eyes averted. “And yet, that’s exactly where we ended up. Imprisoned in that tree, yet separated from the very Cookies we’d fallen for.” A scoff. “What a joke.”

“We changed for them. We followed all four of them into that abyss. It was the biggest change we’ve made in our long, long life.” The Fount waves his hands over the mirror; the image fades into nothingness and Shadow Milk can look up again. “And perhaps the consequence of that choice is what your fear stems from.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “My fear?”

“Of losing him.” The Fount’s eyes are upon Shadow Milk alone; the mirrors have faded away into nothingness as they sit together in the black. “You’ll do anything to keep him. Even bind him.” A smile. “Even change.”

“I don’t want *this* him,” Shadow Milk snaps. “I don’t even know him.”

“No, you don’t. But you could. And you could let the real him know you, too.” The Fount’s smile softens. “Isn’t that frightening? To be known? You’re far braver than I, I must say.”

“Obviously,” Shadow Milk snorts. “You were the one hiding away while I sat in a tree for millennia.”

“Very true.” The Fount dips his head in a polite bow of acknowledgment.

“Though now that you mention it, I thought I’d be more afraid.” Shadow Milk surveys his surroundings with a lazy glance. “I’m totally helpless right now. Probably dying, and about to be locked back up in that tree by White Lily Cookie and those stupid Faeries all over again.”

“It’s possible.”

Shadow Milk perks a brow. “Why aren’t I afraid?”

“Oh, you’re terrified,” the Fount replies serenely. “More than you’ve been in centuries. Your worst fears are on the brink of realization. You may both lose him forever and be imprisoned for eternity in the same day, to say nothing of the poison eating away at your dough. You’re on the precipice of a complete shut-down in every possible way.”

“Ah.”

“But that’s why I’m here!” the Fount says cheerily, spreading his arms wide. “A pleasant distraction in your madness. I told you you called for me. Why, without me, I doubt there’d be much of you left before long! Just little crumbs of what we used to be strewn across a perfect canvas of absolute terror and complete and total insanity.”

Shadow Milk stares as the Fount’s arms lower and rest comfortably back in his lap. “I see,” Shadow Milk remarks tonelessly.

“But, our little predicament has given us plenty of time to work things out. Can’t keep running when there’s nowhere to go, hm?” The Fount chuckles to himself. “Perhaps we should thank Silent Salt for the help.”

A sigh as Shadow Milk lolls his head to the right. “It’s not like the arrow was meant for *me*.”

“No,” the Fount hums, “it wasn’t. Which leads us to another problem, doesn’t it?”

The Beasts. His... friends.

“You know what that was.” The Fount’s watching him again. “You’ve seen it before.”

“An assassin.” Shadow Milk barely spares a glance to the Fount’s nod. “But not the first.”

“No,” the Fount affirms. “Not as far as you’ve seen.”

Shadow Milk picks at invisible lint on his knee as faint wisps of memory fade in and out all around him. “Silent Salt sends preliminary scouts out to survey the area first. Once they’ve gathered all relevant information, they hide amongst the regular populace. Then...”

“The next stage.” The Fount raises his eyes heavenward. “Do you remember it?”

“Attack the head.” Shadow Milk follows his double’s gaze upward. “Target key leaders from the shadows. Remove them.”

“Yes.” The Fount’s voice is slow and heavy. “Which means...”

The scouts are already here.

“No one should have known White Lily Cookie was here.” Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest, studying the empty sky. “Before the markets, she’s only been between the castle and gardens as far as I’m aware.”

“Which means,” the Fount supplies, “there may be at least one pair of eyes amongst the servants.”

Great. Another problem to look forward to.

“As the holder of Silent Salt’s Soul Jam,” Shadow Milk continues, “she should have been the target, except...”

“She’s not really here,” the Fount replies quietly. “And neither is her Soul Jam. Silent Salt would have known that too.”

Shadow Milk nibbles at the edge of his lip. “Then why...?”

A hand comes to rest on his shoulder; Shadow Milk glances over to see the Fount giving him a tired smile.

“You know why. The same reason you gave to her so long ago.”

Pure Vanilla Cookie.

“Her weak point,” Shadow Milk sighs.

And his, it would seem.

“Word of this will reach Silent Salt.” The Fount’s hand drops, coming to rest back in his lap. “That will not have been the only soldier in the markets. The Beasts will know.”

“Great.” Shadow Milk flops backwards with a groan. “Just peachy.”

“You need to talk to them,” the Fount says gently.

“They,” Shadow Milk drawls, “have not listened for a long, long time.”

“Silent Salt will not stop with one attempt.” The Fount shakes his head slowly. “White Lily Cookie is strong – stronger now than ever with the Guardian’s powers. Considering this, and the Silver Tree beating at its heart, the Faerie Kingdom’s borders may not be so easily breached. If so, the Vanilla Kingdom may become the battleground for the Soul Jam in its stead. Should Pure Vanilla Cookie or his kingdom threaten to fall, White Lily Cookie will come to his defense. Silent Salt will be counting on that.”

Shadow Milk narrows his eyes. “Pure Vanilla Cookie is *my* Soul Jam’s holder. The Vanilla Kingdom is *my* domain.”

“Then say that.” The Fount offers a hand; with a petulant grimace, Shadow Milk takes it and allows himself to be pulled back up into a sitting position. “At the very least,” the Fount continues, “you need to try. Because, if Silent Salt knew White Lily Cookie was here and the spy does rest among the servants, it is impossible that you escaped notice as well.”

A curse, old and vile under Shadow Milk’s breath as he rubs at his forehead; the Fount touches his own mouth in shock, *tsking* under his breath. “Fine. I’ll go find them. I’ll make myself *perfectly* clear if those arrogant fools think they can go against me. And if I’m not heard, I’ll crumble as many soldiers as I have to until my point is made.”

“That’s the spirit!” the Fount says brightly. “Though, perhaps a bit ambitious. We are still dying, you know.”

“We’re not dying,” Shadow Milk sighs. “You don’t know that.”

“I know as much as you.” The Fount shrugs and smiles. “It remains a possibility in your mind. So, is there anything you wish to get out of the way, just in case?”

Shadow Milk groans again. “Like what?”

“Hm...” The Fount taps his chin thoughtfully. “You could do a heartfelt love confession. Pour out everything you’ve been feeling, all in one go.”

Shadow Milk makes a face; the Fount laughs, his eyes crinkling with mirth. “Apologies,” the Fount chuckles. “We do like a bit of teasing.”

“You’re so annoying,” Shadow Milk mutters. “Are we always this annoying?”

“Oh, undoubtedly. That part I think will never change, no matter what we become.” The Fount’s gaze suddenly softens as he gives Shadow Milk a slow once-over. “Let me ask this, instead. Have you made a decision?”

“About?”

“Breaking the bond.”

Shadow Milk’s shoulder stiffens. “I want to break the bond,” he answers immediately.

“Are you sure?” the Fount asks quietly.

“Wh- of course I’m *sure*,” Shadow Milk snaps. “I’ve always been sure, even if the reasons... changed.”

“You’re not.” There is no query, no questioning look in the Fount’s gaze. “You’re not ready to let go.”

“I-” Shadow Milk shoves himself to his feet, looming over the other with gritted teeth. “I *don’t* want this. You think I want pain? *Agony*? This constant ache in my chest, this stupid, pathetic farce of what my other half should be?”

“You might be alone again.”

Shadow Milk stills, hating how gentle and sympathetic the Fount looks in turn. “Shut up.”

“No,” the Fount replies simply. “This is something else you need to hear. Perhaps the most important thing of all.” The Fount rises in one smooth motion – graceful. Ethereal. His firm gaze pins Shadow Milk in place; for a moment, it feels as if the Fount’s light has flooded his conscious, blinding him in one dizzying moment.

“Trust him.”

Through Shadow Milk’s pained squint he looks up – only to see both his hands being held in the Fount’s own. Shadow Milk’s being graced with a smile so gentle, so strangely familiar that it makes the breath catch in his throat.

“Trust him,” the Fount repeats softly. “He won’t abandon you.”

“He might.” Shadow Milk’s words feel hoarse, as if the first edges of pain are beginning to creep back into his senses. “They did.”

The Fount’s eyes lid sadly, even as the fond smile on his lips remains. “I know. I know it scares you. It scared me, too.” The Fount leans in; Shadow Milk swallows thickly, averting his eyes as a gentle kiss is pressed to his forehead. “My poor Shadow Milk Cookie. I’ve left you such heavy burdens.”

“He won’t forgive me.” Shadow Milk keeps his gaze downcast. “I don’t want this – this *thing* wearing his face, but-”

But Shadow Milk’s not alone. It’s torture, it’s agony, it’s cruel beyond measure – but he’s not alone.

Another kiss is pressed to Shadow Milk’s cheek. “He will forgive you,” the Fount murmurs. “We have been with him long enough, far before he even knew our names to know this as truth.”

“He shouldn’t.”

The Fount’s smile deepens. “But he will. And that is where your choice lies.” A gentle squeeze to their hands. “If you wish to be a Cookie worthy of his forgiveness.”

“Impossible,” Shadow Milk dismisses weakly. “Shadow Milk Cookie cannot be saved.”

“He can be loved.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes squeeze shut – it does nothing. The Fount remains ever bright before him, gazing at him through it all. “Ask it of him,” the Fount says softly. “And he will love

you.”

“It won’t be the same,” Shadow Milk croaks back.

“It may not.” Another gentle squeeze. “You may never have what you had before. His feelings for you may be real, or simply a fantasy – but for the first time, you will allow him to choose. And Pure Vanilla Cookie, our beautiful Pure Vanilla Cookie – he will choose to love you. Perhaps it will be painful, perhaps it will be different. But it will be love.”

Shadow Milk throws himself forward; the Fount’s arms come up to catch him as he buries his face in the other’s chest. He refuses to make a sound, refuses to let slip the tears threatening to fall even as the Fount wraps him tight, holding him close and safe. Even like this, Shadow Milk knows the other is smiling, can feel another kiss being pressed to the top of his head.

“I,” Shadow Milk rasps, “can’t be you. Not again.”

“My darling Shadow Milk Cookie,” the Fount murmurs. “Be brave. Do not look to the past for answers, for our happiness never lay there. Accept it, do not run from it – but grow from where you are, not where you’ve been. You are strong, so much stronger than I ever was. Clever and quick, beautiful and bold.” A gentle hand brushes Shadow Milk’s cheek. “If you are not happy as you are – allow yourself to change, as I did. Even if it is a mistake, even if we must try again a thousand times – try. For every path you take, may it be one that brings you happiness. For both of us.”

The world shudders around them; Shadow Milk feels a shiver run up his spine as a sudden, distant burst of sound echoes around him. It’s muffled, barely more than a whisper – but it’s sound, new and terrifying. Faint light bleeds in and out of existence through the darkness, splashes of watercolor paints that spread and fade with each breath.

The Fount squeezes him one last time. “Our time is up,” he says softly. “I am glad you were here with me.”

“Fool,” Shadow Milk laughs into the other’s chest. “You aren’t real. You’re just the delusion of a dying madman. What have you got to be glad for?”

“That’s true,” the Fount murmurs. “But even if that is all I can be, I will love you just the same.”

One final kiss is pressed to Shadow Milk’s cheek before the world sharply blurs. The Fount’s luminescent arms fade from his grasp; Shadow Milk gasps as he tumbles forward, reality melting away in a dazzling, dreamlike rush. He’s falling, a breathless descent that feels as if he’s being submerged, drowned in sudden, frightening desperation.

Then, a sound. Clattering, a sharp edge brushing against his mind.

A flash of light. More flashes – sharp, quick and fleeting.

Pain.

Shadow Milk's eyes snap open; he gasps sharply as sensations begin pouring in through a steady trickle turned all-consuming roar in vicious rapidity. Shadow Milk's head spins as blinding lights and shouts ricochet around his head; pain, all-consuming pain bleeds in with every ragged breath as reality sinks back in around him.

Breath. He's still breathing, at least.

Barely.

Shadow Milk can't see – not properly, not beyond little specks of light that dance away from his haggard vision before darkness swoops in to replace them. The noise and flurry of movement all around him is dizzying; he can feel the wind of Cookies hurrying by, the distant noise of metal instruments clattering on trays as the shouts get louder, *louder, louder*. The echoes of pain burn in his shoulder the sharpest, a throbbing fire that's only getting hotter by the second. There are several hands upon him, all centered around the pain – shoving his fur out of the way, holding it in place as something wet continually trickles down his front leg.

It hurts. Shadow Milk is tired of hurting.

Consciousness flickers in and out on his will alone – largely, his attempts to doze out of it. It's hard to ignore the noise, harder to ignore the pain that keeps jolting him to a state of half-awareness before fading away again. He's unable to make out much around him, a few blurry glimpses of unfamiliar Cookies and barely more than a word or two before it fades into a dull murmur. It's never more than a few moments before Shadow Milk is slipping away again once more.

The next time he wakes, Shadow Milk cannot help but note the scent of lilies and vanilla wafting through the air, along with a steady warmth pressed up against his neck. There's arguing around him; the words are unintelligible, but strained and desperate. Hands grab at him, pulling his head closer – droplets fall on his snout as something shaking and small huddles and shakes against him.

Shadow Milk's Soul Jam pulses, a warning bell ringing that vibrates through his head. It's calling to him, to his surroundings in a violent plea that shakes him to his core.

Danger prickles down his dough, a foreboding feeling of refusal rising in his chest.

This feeling is familiar-

Too familiar.

All Shadow Milk can muster is a weak snarl of defiance before something small and warm presses up against his chest.

A sea of black swallows him in an instant.

Shadow Milk gasps as he tumbles forward, reality melting away in a dazzling, dreamlike rush. He has no time, no way to fight off the inevitable. He can only surrender, a scream

dying in his throat as he's pulled under by the unmistakable sensations of another soul grasping at his own.

Shadow Milk's side hits the ground.

Hard.

When Shadow Milk forces himself up on trembling limbs, the scene is startling in its familiarity. A milky silhouette of green shifts in blurs beneath his paws, rustling along the same warm, summer wind that caresses gently at his fur. Shadow Milk's still-swimming gaze travels across the towering trees surrounding him, gleaming beneath the moonlight dancing across their leaves.

A sharp bleat cuts through the air.

Shadow Milk turns his head, chest heaving with exhaustion as he finds a small, wide-eyed lamb staring up at him.

The lamb bleats again; its eyes feel so empty, yet there is clear desperation shining through mismatched gold and blue. It stumbles upward, pressing its front hooves into his side as it pushes at him before unsteadily sliding back down. Another bleat, loud and calling – pleading with him.

A flash of fangs as Shadow Milk pulls back, stumbling to the right as he tries to draw away. His shoulder aches, limiting his movements – but he growls, warding the creature off as best he can.

Away. It has to stay away.

The lamb does not listen; it only draws closer. Each step it takes is slow and stumbling; it leans heavily on its left leg, limping badly on its right. Dark liquid oozes from its shoulder – and the sight is enough for Shadow Milk's curled lip to lower, for a pang of sorrow to echo in his heart.

It's hurt.

It's scared.

Shadow Milk, after a moment of hesitation, allows the lamb to reach him. When it bleats, warbling in its cry, he slowly leans in close and tucks his head around the other. A soft grumble, as soothing as he can as the lamb buries itself against him, shaking from what can only be exhaustion.

The wind around them is turning cold; the lamb shivers and Shadow Milk presses closer, settling down as he curls his body around the other. He keeps the lamb tucked against him, using his tail to shield it as best he can. The lamb is still trembling, still burrowing closer; Shadow Milk sighs, a short huff through his nose as he lets it hide amongst his fur.

Darkness is creeping in all around them; the leaves from the trees shrivel and crumple to the ground, even the grass feels dry and brittle beneath Shadow Milk's form. The biting cold

presses close, sinking in wherever it can find weakness – the sheep bleats, and Shadow Milk can only nestle closer with a comforting nuzzle to its head.

There is not much warmth he can offer – but what he has, he will give.

The light around them is fading fast, but Shadow Milk cannot bring himself to rise. He's so tired; his limbs ache as if he's been running for miles. The only pleasant sensation left is the lamb hiding against him, its heartbeat a weak pulse against his side. Yet even through his tired gaze, Shadow Milk can pick out the blackened claws of decay inching their way through the withering grass.

It's coming towards him – towards them both.

The lamb bleats weakly and Shadow Milk's teeth grit with resolve.

Slowly, on shaky legs, he rises; the lamb presses desperately against his side, chasing after the warmth it's lost. Shadow Milk limps forward, a stumbling lope through the grass that sends shooting pains up his side – yet still, he moves forward. There's a glance back at the lamb, a toss of his head and a beckoning grunt. The lamb stares at him, misty-eyed and lost – until it too limps forward.

Forward. There is only forward, on and on as the pair move as one. Ichor oozes from their shoulders in twin aches; the lamb stumbles and Shadow Milk noses at it until it struggles back to its feet. It is only when they've reached the edge, only when the darkened forest around them opens up into a bright, gleaming meadow that Shadow Milk finally, finally allows himself to collapse to the ground.

Luminescent flowers glimmer in the moonlight all around him; they're familiar in a way Shadow Milk's hazy mind can't place.

The lamb slumps down beside him, its bleats reduced to weak sounds; Shadow Milk groans, rolling onto his side before protectively curling back around its small form.

The wind is warmer here. The moonlight glitters peacefully down, illuminating the darkness just enough to let Shadow Milk gaze into the eyes of the lamb. It looks so exhausted, as if it's struggling just to stay awake – yet still it lifts its head, giving Shadow Milk a weak nuzzle against the side of his jaw. Shadow Milk nuzzles back before they both slowly slump back down into the grass.

Shadow Milk's eyes close as the dream melts away; the last thing he feels is the heartbeat of the lamb against him and the soft, warm wind rustling through his fur.

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Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound filters slowly through Shadow Milk's mind, an echo resonating at the edge of his consciousness.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Water, slowly trickling down from... somewhere. A steady beat, tapping through his head over and over again.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

It's annoying. Really annoying.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Shadow Milk opens his eyes.

His vision is blurred, marred by spots of darkness that makes him wince with exertion. His surroundings feel impenetrable in their haziness – yet there is a distinct lack of movement busying itself around him like before. Gone are the shouts and scurrying footsteps; it is quiet, so quiet that the trickle of water penetrates through his skull like a knife.

Where is it coming from?

Shadow Milk tries to lift his head; only to immediately slump back down, a pained noise echoing through his fangs.

“Please don't move.”

A voice, quiet and firm – and familiar.

Shadow Milk blinks, trying to clear the fog clouding his mind as he takes in slow, pained breaths. He's resting on his side, the ache in his shoulder throbbing from his exertion – there's a hand placed upon him near the wound and the now-unmistakable scent of lilies in the air. A gentle pulse of magic thrums through his dough; the pain recedes, barely as Shadow Milk heaves an exhausted sigh.

“Lie still, please.” White Lily Cookie's voice carries through the quiet of the room; through his spotty vision, Shadow Milk thinks he can make out the tall cabinets and sterile instruments of a healing bay. There's a sink off to the side – the damned source of that infernal dripping.

“Do you need to transform back?”

An exhausted huff leaves Shadow Milk's snout – he's way too tired to try.

“It's alright. I'd like to not jostle your wound by any sudden changes, if it can be helped.” The pulse of magic strengthens, and Shadow Milk has to muffle a noise of relief at the pain ebbing away. “How are you feeling?”

Shadow Milk grunts loudly, irritably; only to be shushed in reply.

“I’m sorry.” White Lily Cookie’s voice is whisper soft. “Please, do not wake him.”

A flicker of confusion – before a gentle waft of vanilla catches Shadow Milk’s attention immediately. He cranes his head, following the scent to find a small body curled up against his neck.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is buried against his fur, fast asleep.

The other’s robes are stained, soaked with old jam that’s become crusted around his shoulder. Even now, fresh ichor oozes from the wound; Shadow Milk stiffens, a frightened noise ripping from his throat.

“I’m sorry,” White Lily Cookie murmurs, voice pained. “You were slipping away – both of you. You were so weakened. I thought, if I allowed you to connect, to ease some part of your pain-”

Shadow Milk makes another noise, trying to grasp her attention as his eyes remain locked on Pure Vanilla Cookie.

“I can’t close it.” Exhaustion, sorrow laces her tone. “Your dough is too brittle – the poison’s necrotized the wound. So long as it remains open, he’ll continue to bleed and he’s – he can’t heal himself from this. Not while you remain bound.” An audible swallow. “I need more time, and I don’t...” White Lily Cookie’s voice falters, the sound making Shadow Milk’s jam curl. “I don’t know if I have it.”

Another noise rips itself from Shadow Milk’s throat; at his neck, Pure Vanilla shifts in his sleep.

“Shadow Milk Cookie.” White Lily Cookie’s voice is soft, pleading. “I know you cannot trust me. I know – you have done things I cannot forgive. But-” The magic strengthens, another pulse bleeding through Shadow Milk’s dough. “If this bond is broken, I can save him. I can save you both. Please.”

Shadow Milk’s vision falters – he issues a soft noise that White Lily Cookie echoes with a swallow.

“Your separation,” she says softly, “was to weaken the bond, to weaken both of you, so I could sever it by force. If I could not use the moonlight to strengthen my spells, I would need you at your weakest. But – if you were to allow me, Shadow Milk Cookie. If you truly do not fight me, if you can trust me with this alone, I-”

Another noise, low and long. The hand leaves Shadow Milk’s shoulder; in his blurred vision, he can pick out the silhouette of White Lily Cookie approaching from his side. She’s searching him, looking for an answer with held breath.

“Please,” she murmurs hoarsely. “Please – will you let him go?”

Shadow Milk’s eyes close. His tail lifts, trembling in the air – before thumping once on the floor.

White Lily Cookie lets out a breath, a choked sound leaving her before she whispers:

“Thank you.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes remain shut, but he can hear her begin moving about. The sound of chalk being dragged across the tile floors, etching itself in circles over and over as minutes drag by. There’s a clinking of glass and metal followed by the spilling of milk and vanilla extract splashing down around him. Shadow Milk concentrates on breathing, trying to will away the tension stiffening his shoulders.

Trust him.

“Alright.” Soft and gentle. “Are you ready?”

Shadow Milk sighs through his nose, pretending away the terror gripping at his gut.

She could seal him. She could destroy him, rip them apart and throw him away. He is not needed. He is not wanted.

Trust him.

A glow pierces through Shadow Milk’s closed eyes; reluctantly, he cracks them open to see the runes ablaze with white light, White Lily Cookie standing before him as her shimmering, radiant Guardian form. Her gaze is kind, but there’s a nervousness that refuses to leave her eyes, an uncertainty between them that hangs in the air. Shadow Milk’s vision swims dangerously as his throat tightens.

White Lily Cookie raises her hand; there’s another pulse of gentle white light as the threads of fate shimmer into view. Shadow Milk cranes his head; he can see them laced around Pure Vanilla, tightening in a sickening grasp. They’re binding him in place, cutting into the wound that still oozes with each shaky breath.

Shadow Milk wants to look away.

He can’t.

White Lily Cookie steps forward into the circle, keeping her palm extended. She carefully surveys the threads, taut and unforgiving, before directing her tired gaze to Shadow Milk. “Please,” she repeats hoarsely, eyes full of pleading. “I won’t hurt you. I- I promise I will do my best.”

Shadow Milk lets out a shuddering sigh; he forces the tension back, forces himself to breathe, in and out as he tries not to look at her. Slowly, gradually, the threads begin to slacken – every glance Shadow Milk makes at them seems to pull them taut once more, so he does his best to keep his gaze on the ground.

Breathe. In and out.

Trust him.

“Please let him go,” White Lily Cookie says softly; from the corner of his eyes, Shadow Milk can see her raising her staff high, even as it trembles in her grasp. “I will save you. Both of you.”

Shadow Milk exhales weakly.

Trust him. Trust him.

“Let him go.”

Trust him.

“Let him go,” White Lily Cookie begs one final time, staff ablaze with light.

Shadow Milk’s eyes clench shut, a haggard cry from gritted teeth.

Even if it is a mistake.

Even if we must try again a thousand times.

Try.

Shadow Milk releases one final breath, letting his body slump in surrender.

White Lily Cookie’s staff slams down; the room is ablaze in burning white light, consuming every shred of Shadow Milk’s senses.

His eyes flutter shut as the sound of something snaps.

Darkness rushes up to claim him like an old friend.

Chapter 26

Scattered florescent lights. Hazy, swimming images of a water-stained ceiling. The unmistakable hum of a ceiling fan spinning overhead.

The worst godsdamned headache Shadow Milk's ever had in his life.

At least it tells him two things – he's not dead, and by the sound of things, he's not sealed away either. Small miracles, though of little help to his swiftly fouling mood.

Cracking open a single eyelid feels like a herculean task; the fact he eventually manages two deserves no less than a standing ovation. His vision is cloudy, fogged over as if in accompaniment to the sharp throbbing in Shadow Milk's head. All he can make out is the ceiling overhead and the murky blur of the fan spinning above him.

The scent of disinfectant hangs in the air, familiar and off-putting in the same breath. The room – the healing bay, by the hazy looks of things – is completely silent. There's no hurried footsteps clacking on the tile, no shouts ringing in the air. Shadow Milk is alone, tucked into one of the beds; distantly, he realizes the relocation has no doubt come about as a result of his return to Cookie form. As he shifts curiously, the linen sheets surrounding him scratch uncomfortably on his dough.

Ugh. Why not silk? Where is the class in this place?

Shadow Milk is, by the looks of things, completely alone; the long sigh he exhales is met with deeper silence, causing him to huff in irritation. Where is everyone? Another glance around reveals no sign of life, yet by the sun streaming in through a nearby window, it can't be later than noon.

So why, oh why is Shadow Milk not being *attended* to?

Shadow Milk kicks the covers off with a huff, leaning on his side to push himself up-

Only to slump down with a sharp hiss, pain pulsing mercilessly through his shoulder.

"Ow," he gasps to an audience of none. "Ow."

After taking a few seconds to gasp and curse, Shadow Milk slowly, tentatively pushes himself back up with his opposite arm. He casts a weary gaze over his still-throbbing shoulder, only now taking note of the bandages wrapped tight around it. They're fresh, from the looks of things – or would be, as Shadow Milk dimly notices a fresh stain of jam starting to bleed through the wrap.

Right. Now he *really* needs some attending.

With a groan, Shadow Milk gingerly swings his legs off the side of the bed; when he gets to his feet, the room swims dangerously as he tries in vain to catch his balance. He falls

backwards, twice, but the bed is there to catch him before Shadow Milk finally manages to get himself properly upright. One unsteady step forward, then another until the room finally stops spinning before his eyes.

The thought of floating feels *very* dangerous right now, makes Shadow Milk nauseous to even consider – which leaves him with the detestable, singular option to proceed on foot. Like some common Cake Hound.

His mood's getting worse.

Shadow Milk teeters across the room, muttering irritably to himself; a large wooden door bars his way, forcing Shadow Milk to size it up for a bit before attempting a few tugs with his good arm. It budes, slightly – just enough for Shadow Milk to wedge his foot between the frame and carefully wriggle his way out into the hall.

Nothing. There's no one about, just a familiar corridor with putridly pristine Pure Vanilla statues glimmering back at him. The silence is deafening; each slow step Shadow Milk takes echoes through the hallway eerily as he stumbles unsteadily forward. He doesn't know where he's going, exactly – only that there must be someone, *anyone* in the castle right now.

Shouldn't there?

A new sort of nausea is twisting in Shadow Milk's stomach as he tries hall after hall; his movements are sluggish, his head unpleasantly foggy. He has to stop several times, catching his breath as his repeatedly unfocused eyes try to pick out any sign of life. It's quiet, far too quiet for his liking and the irritation in his jam is giving way to nerves as Shadow Milk glances uneasily about. The hallways have never been this empty, not since –

Since the beginning.

The hallways had been equally devoid of life back then, hadn't they? Pure Vanilla hadn't trusted him, had emptied his castle of Cookies to keep them far away from Shadow Milk's clutches. He'd borne Shadow Milk's cruelty alone because Shadow Milk had been dangerous, vindictive, a vicious Beast tethered by a single chain. He'd painted his deception with smiles and promises of Shadow Milk's own comfort, isolating him while claiming to understand him in the same breath.

Lies upon lies, bricks built into a tower that has crumbled all around them. Had that even been Pure Vanilla's choice? Had Pure Vanilla really, truly wanted him here to begin with?

Does he want him gone now?

Shadow Milk slumps heavily against the wall, breaths ragged as he clutches at his damp bandages. His shoulder is throbbing with pain, dizziness and nausea spiraling inside him as his vision refuses to clear. A vice-like sensation is gripping at his chest as Shadow Milk drops to his knees, resting his burning forehead against the cool metal of-

No.

Shadow Milk recoils with a strangled cry; his own horrified reflection stares back at him upon prongs of gleaming silver. Darkness floods in all around him as the castle melts away, replaced by only a sea of black. Shadow Milk stumbles to his feet, gasping for breath that does not come as he turns every which way; all he can see is the endless void and glinting metal chains that encircle him, pressing closer with each stuttered sound.

He's back. They've sealed him, locked him away again – forever, this time. What had he expected? He can't be forgiven, can't be trusted. This is where he belongs. What he deserves.

The reflection that stares back bears the head of a beast with a crimson-stained maw; Shadow Milk's eyes clench shut as he doubles over with a roar-

The chains are grabbing at him, holding him tight – the end? The fork raises high, baring its silver fangs; it's come to pierce his dough through, to draw the curtain on his final moments. Shadow Milk struggles in vain, throwing himself left and right as metal kisses his throat-

Something collides with his head.

Hard.

Light floods through Shadow Milk's consciousness, darkness swallowed whole as new, sudden pain smarts in his head – accompanied by the sound of a small hiss.

“Ouch.”

Shadow Milk's eyes snap open; his chest heaves as familiar florescent lights stare back at his swimming vision. The ceiling fan is spinning hazily overhead; the smell of disinfectant is just as potent as ever, souring the gulps of air Shadow Milk is swallowing down as if they were his last. A half-glance down shows crisp linen sheets, tucked up to his chin and scratching at his dough just the same.

It's the healing bay, just as he'd left it.

The difference comes in the form of movement, a figure Shadow Milk has to momentarily squint to make out as they rub at their forehead.

Shadow Milk's haze clears in an instant the moment the soft scent of vanilla wafts past him.

Pure Vanilla sits across from him, tucked into a small chair and cradling his forehead with one hand. He's wincing; distantly, Shadow Milk notes the throbbing in his own head right as Pure Vanilla's gaze lands upon him.

In an instant Pure Vanilla's eyes snap open to full; he jolts forward in his chair, hands clasp down in the sheets. “Shadow Milk Cookie! Are you alright?”

Is he? What an absurd question.

Pure Vanilla's gaze is searching; when Shadow Milk offers nothing in reply, Pure Vanilla hurriedly continues: “My apologies. You looked as if you were having a nightmare. I tried

to-” Pure Vanilla’s hand reaches to brush his own forehead. “Does it hurt? Your head knocked against my own quite badly.”

Shadow Milk continues staring at him; disbelief keeps him still and silent. Yes, it hurts, but a single bruise is hardly the topic at hand.

His gaze travels slowly over the other; Pure Vanilla is dressed in a simple gown, not his usual stately robes. There are no bandages wrapped around his shoulder, no sign of residual harm aside from the bags under his eyes and the weariness written all over his face. His hair is mussed and unbrushed, as if it had gone for quite a while without care.

Has he been here the whole time?

There’s a pause between them, concern plain on Pure Vanilla’s face as he reaches forward – then hesitates. His hand withdraws, pulled back into his lap as Pure Vanilla’s expression shifts into something troubled. The way he’s looking at Shadow Milk is unfamiliar; there is no hazy smile, no deep adoration reflected in milky pools. The spell that had bound them together is broken, the snapping of the threads echoing in the back of Shadow Milk’s mind.

Pure Vanilla’s gaze upon him feels foreign and for once, Shadow Milk has no idea what the other is feeling.

The pang that thrums through Shadow Milk’s heart is to be expected; it’s all he can do to simply avert his eyes, returning his empty gaze to the ceiling. The fan overhead is a nice distraction as Shadow Milk traces the spin of each blade around and around, picking a new one each time to keep his eyes busy.

Shadow Milk’s mind, however, does not spare him a moment. A heavy weight has settled on his chest, each breath coming with mindful exertion. His shoulder throbs dangerously, his head smarts – his limbs ache through every speck of his dough. He is in pain, a lot of it; and the Cookie sitting at his side is a promise of more to come.

How strange, to feel so completely at a loss. He stands upon a stage with an audience of one; the spotlight shines upon him, but not a sound escapes his lips. He has not been given a role. There are no lines to follow, no guiding hand to lead him into the next scene.

The Beast of Deceit stands behind the curtain, brandishing its script and baring its teeth – it knows what to do. It knows its lines by heart, has trod these boards a thousand times. Destroy. Run. Repeat. Over and over again, slaking its thirst for vengeance upon the bodies left in its wake. No beginning or end to its miserable tale.

What a tiresome performance.

Pure Vanilla had stayed with him, at least. A kind gesture, even as Shadow Milk stares upwards and braces for the inevitable. He can feel the other’s eyes upon him incessantly; looking for answers that Shadow Milk cannot bear to give. Judging the soul before him for damnation or salvation by Pure Vanilla’s hand alone.

Trust him.

Shadow Milk isn't sealed. He's not alone, for the moment. Two fears have been passed with flying colors.

Now comes the rest.

A hand brushes against his arm; it takes everything Shadow Milk has not to bare his teeth with how violently his emotions surge at the touch. Every inch of his dough is vibrating with the instinct to run, to lash out, to escape the feeling of an all-too weighty gaze upon him.

"May I lay with you?"

Shadow Milk blinks; his head lolls to the side, pinning Pure Vanilla with a look of sheer disbelief. Pure Vanilla's at least got the decency to have a slight flush to his cheeks, but there's something unflinching in his smile. "I thought it might be easier," he says gently. "For both of us."

If the words are meant to settle Shadow Milk's raging doubts, they do anything but.

Wordlessly, Shadow Milk turns his head away; he shifts an inch to the side, about all he can muster in his present state. Pure Vanilla takes the movement for the acquiescence it is, lifting the covers and slipping in right next to Shadow Milk. There's not much room on the bed – nothing like what they've shared before – but there's enough to lay side by side on their backs with only their arms brushed up against the other.

Shadow Milk stares up at the ceiling; his mind is a whirlwind that brings none of the answers he needs. All he can focus on is the fan overhead and the sensation of Pure Vanilla's warmth seeping in through their slight touch.

That, too, feels different. The perpetual comfort Pure Vanilla had exuded has been replaced by nothing more than a light touch. The warmth does not spread through him as it once did; dread clutches painfully in Shadow Milk's throat.

Had it merely been the bond heightening his affections? Had Shadow Milk been influenced beyond repair too? Or is it simply the fear eating away at him?

Curiosity causes his gaze to fall to the side – only to find Pure Vanilla looking back, gaze gentle and calm.

Heat swoops through Shadow Milk's core in an instant; he looks away again, fixating once again on the fan.

No. These are his feelings. This was his choice.

He doesn't get to hide behind the bond this time.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

Pure Vanilla's soft voice breaks the silence; Shadow Milk doesn't dare glance over, but he can feel the other sigh beside him. A pause, before: "I have always struggled with finding my words in moments like these."

A death knell. The warning before Pure Vanilla lowers the axe.

Trust him.

“Perhaps I should allow you to speak first.” A subtle shifting on the bed. “Do you have anything you wish to ask me?”

Of course he does. The thoughts are instant, unbidden and rising like bile in the back of Shadow Milk’s throat.

Do you still care for me?

“How long have I been out?” Shadow Milk winces at the aching scratch in his throat.

“Nine days.”

Precise. Pure Vanilla has been counting.

Was any of it real?

“What happened,” Shadow Milk rasps, “after I fell?”

Pure Vanilla’s hand slides closer under the sheets, resting gently atop Shadow Milk’s wrist. A show of comfort, offered unconsciously or not, but it does nothing to quell the raging tempest in Shadow Milk’s chest. “We brought you here. You were – are – badly hurt, but White Lily Cookie managed to stabilize your wounds.” A pause. “It took some time, but she managed to create a suitable antitoxin to combat the worst of the poison’s effects.”

Time. That’s what she’d needed. What he’d given her.

Do you hate me?

“Must have been a shock,” Shadow Milk says dryly. “In the markets. A giant beast, falling from the sky.”

“They’re grateful.”

Shadow Milk blinks; his instinct is to turn, to appraise Pure Vanilla’s expression – he refuses, holds himself still. “Who?”

“My people.” Pure Vanilla’s hand gives a gentle squeeze to Shadow Milk’s wrist. “You protected me.”

A snort slips through Shadow Milk’s defenses. “Not well. You were bleeding out too, as I recall.”

“Yes. In their eyes, two arrows were fired that day.” Another squeeze. “But you stopped one. And prevented more.”

“They aren’t real, by the way.” The remark spills out unbidden, a line of defense surging to the front. “The soldiers.”

Pure Vanilla shifts again; from the corner of his eyes, Shadow Milk can spot the other rolling onto his side. “What do you mean?”

“They’re constructs.” Shadow Milk keeps his gaze trained on the ceiling, refusing to meet Pure Vanilla’s searching gaze. “Silent Salt was the envoy of Solidarity. When... when we changed, the loyal soldiers at Silent Salt’s beck and call were discarded. All that remains are silent, obedient creations carved from the salt deposits of the Black Salt Flatlands.”

“Why are you telling me this?” The remark is not unkind, merely curious.

“Because it’s you.” Shadow Milk closes his eyes, trying to will away the feeling of being watched. “Because despite the fact we both could have died, some part of you would still be grieving the loss of your would-be assassin’s life.” A sigh, low and long. “Like a fool, I might add.”

Pure Vanilla lets out a soft exhale of his own. There’s a beat of silence accompanied by the feeling of Pure Vanilla’s hand slowly slipping off Shadow Milk’s wrist; Shadow Milk mourns the loss instantly, and hates himself for it.

“You know me well.”

Have I ever known this you?

“So, out with it,” Shadow Milk continues, irritation lacing his tone, “What’s happened? How many more soldiers have you found?”

Pure Vanilla pauses, before replying: “None. It has been quiet ever since.”

“Then you’re all the worse for it.” Shadow Milk shifts restlessly, filled with the sudden urge to push himself from the bed. “Silent Salt will have scouts hidden among your people. There is never just *one* arrow.”

“Perhaps,” Pure Vanilla remarks softly, “your injuries have stayed their hand?”

Shadow Milk very much doubts that. The Beast inside him curls its lips in a sneer, a vile retort pushing at his lips.

“Where is Black Raisin Cookie?” Shadow Milk says instead, leaning on his good shoulder as he attempts to rise – only to hiss in pain through gritted teeth. “S-She’s got sharp eyes, she’ll have seen-”

“Shadow Milk Cookie.” Pure Vanilla’s hand catches on his arm. “Please rest. You are still badly wounded.”

“I’m fine,” Shadow Milk lies – this, at least, feels familiar.

“You’re not.” Pure Vanilla’s grip is firm; Shadow Milk still refuses to meet his unfamiliar gaze. “Your wound is still crumbling. You need to lie still.”

“I can’t keep lying here.” Shadow Milk tugs his arm, but Pure Vanilla simply holds him fast. “I’ll be fine. Let me g-”

The phrase catches in his throat as soon as it’s out. Shadow Milk swallows the grief down, keeping his gaze on the floor.

“No.” Pure Vanilla’s grasp tightens. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Something strange twists in Shadow Milk’s chest; he doesn’t dare hope, knows it is only Healer Cookie at play here. “I can’t be here.”

“You can.” Pure Vanilla’s tone is so gentled, yet so resolute. “I’m asking you to.”

Injured. He’s hurt, he’s aching – but Pure Vanilla wants him to stay. Wants him to heal.

His wound is still crumbling.

Shadow Milk stills in the other’s grasp; he’s promising nothing, but the cessation of his struggles slowly earns him a loosening of Pure Vanilla’s grasp.

“Can you lie back down?”

Refusal builds in his chest; the Beast of Deceit bares its fangs, shoving its shoulder into the door he’s keeping so precariously locked.

“Please.”

If I wasn’t injured – would you still ask me to stay?

After several long moments of silence, Shadow Milk slowly lowers himself back down. He rests on his side, his injured shoulder elevated as he puts his back to Pure Vanilla. The other says nothing, yet his heavy gaze is palpable. Shadow Milk simply closes his eyes and braces himself, waiting for the next words to come.

It’s so wretched, being scriptless. All he can do is react to the cues.

“Thank you.” Pure Vanilla’s soft voice carries through the silence of the room, his pause potent before he continues: “May I ask you something?”

Despite everything, a wry smile twitches at the curve of Shadow Milk’s lips. “You,” he rasps, “are going to do so anyway.”

Familiar. It’s familiar, achingly so when Pure Vanilla huffs a small laugh in reply. “That’s... true. But I wished to ask just the same.”

“Why?” Something about the familiarity eases the mood, allows Shadow Milk to – carefully – roll over on his back and meet Pure Vanilla’s gentle gaze. “You know I’ll answer.”

Pure Vanilla's offering a small smile of his own now. "I'd like to offer you the choice."

The mood sours instantly; Shadow Milk wrenches his gaze away in an instant. "Fool," he replies darkly. "Why bother? It's not like I ever gave you one."

A quiet settles that feels suffocating. Shadow Milk's on the verge of turning away again before Pure Vanilla murmurs: "I can see why you'd think that."

"I don't *think* that," Shadow Milk hisses, eyes closing as his teeth grit. "I know. Are you so foolish as to pretend otherwise?"

Pure Vanilla hums quietly. "Do you claim to know my mind better than me?"

"Do you," Shadow Milk replies lowly, "claim your mind was solely your own?"

"I was changed." Pure Vanilla says it so easily, as if the words don't sink like a stone through Shadow Milk's chest. "It's true that I... lost myself within my love for you, at the end. But that does not mean I did not make choices."

Shadow Milk swallows thickly as he feels a hand touch his arm; he does not look, does not dare. "I have had much time to think," Pure Vanilla says softly, "during these long days apart. I have had time to reflect with a clear mind on everything that has passed; even still, there are conflicting feelings within me. But, while there are things I certainly would have done differently, there are also choices I made that I do not regret, even as I am now." A pause, before: "If I tell you them – will you listen?"

Liar. Lying to Shadow Milk, lying to himself. There was never any choice from the beginning, just threads tied tight around Pure Vanilla's heart.

Trust him.

Shadow Milk, still staring vacantly to the side, gives the slightest nod of his head.

Pure Vanilla shifts closer; Shadow Milk tenses as he feels the other's hand gently brush against his own. "I do not regret asking to be your friend."

A sharp inhale as something violently clenches in Shadow Milk's chest.

"I do not regret asking you to stay with me," Pure Vanilla continues softly. "Nor the days I shared at your side. You brought so much happiness to my life, Shadow Milk Cookie. You brought pain – and you have brought regrets. There are many I owe an apology to, fractures in my friendships that I need to repair from my time devoted to you and only you."

Distantly, Shadow Milk pictures the crack in the ceiling of the bedroom before the image slowly slips from his mind.

"But," Pure Vanilla sighs, "I cannot regret it all. And I don't know if I place the blame solely on you. For you were changed as well."

“It was my fault.” Shadow Milk’s reply is little more than a feeble croak; such a pitiful delivery, quaking upon his stage. “My choice.”

“You didn’t know.” Pure Vanilla squeezes his hand. “You big liar.”

“I should have.” Shadow Milk feels sick, dizzy by the sound of his own voice. “I controlled you.”

“You loved me.” Pure Vanilla says the words so simply, as if remarking on the weather. “And I loved you back. Those feelings fed off each other, distorted into something so powerful that it consumed me whole.”

Shadow Milk’s mind instantly supplies that wretched memory of Pure Vanilla, hazy and smiling without thought beneath the moonlight.

“But love cannot be created from nothing,” Pure Vanilla continues softly. “I did not love you, in the beginning. I wanted to help you, but I did not love you. And I don’t think you loved me either. Am I correct?”

Any hope of forming a single word is lost; Shadow Milk simply lays there and nods his head.

“You are unable to see your own moments of kindness.” Pure Vanilla shifts closer; his forehead comes to rest on Shadow Milk’s shoulder as he sighs. “Would you like to know the first time I felt love for you?”

Shadow Milk lets out a strangled laugh. “If it was that damned plush-”

“No.” Pure Vanilla’s smile can be felt against Shadow Milk’s shoulder. “Though, I was touched by that moment. What made you do that?”

Another huff of a laugh. “Oh, I just couldn’t *stand* to see my pretty face ruined.”

“Liar.”

“Yes,” Shadow Milk affirms.

“I first felt love,” Pure Vanilla continues gently, “on our trip to the markets.”

“What?” Shadow Milk blinks in disbelief, finally opening his eyes to give Pure Vanilla a bewildered look. “You hated me in the markets.”

“I didn’t hate you,” Pure Vanilla sighs. “I was angry with you. Disappointed, but not surprised.” A pause. “Until you surprised me.”

“When?” Shadow Milk cannot roll onto his side, not with his shoulder pulsing with every breath; he does, however, allow his head to loll to the right to meet Pure Vanilla’s gaze in full. “In the tavern? I was drunk.”

“No.” Pure Vanilla smiles. “With Biscocho and Rosquillo Cookie.”

“Who?”

Pure Vanilla sighs, eyes fluttering slightly. “My friends, Shadow Milk Cookie. The two boys you were playing with?”

“Oh.” Right. Those two little squirts that had taken him for a ride. “What did I do that so charmed you? As I recall, you were still angry with me after they left.”

“I was. And you were angry with me.” Pure Vanilla shifts slightly, his forehead rubbing against Shadow Milk’s shoulder. “I can’t imagine you felt any amount of affection for me in that moment. Yet, even though I was still furious with you, I was grateful that you hadn’t harmed them. If anything, they seemed quite taken with you.”

“The bar for my behavior was on the floor, hm?” Shadow Milk remarks dryly.

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla affirms. “It was. I did not fall in love with you for such a small thing, but... it mattered to me. To see you willing to hold back, even if only for the sake of children.”

“I’m not sure how much credit you can give me there.” Shadow Milk tilts his own head, resting his cheek against the top of Pure Vanilla’s forehead – mercifully, the other lets him. “Seems like a pretty flimsy reason to care for me.”

“You’re very sweet,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back, “when you want to be. You are impulsive and destructive, selfish and possessive – but I have also seen you be considerate and gentle in turn.” A hand reaches up, brushing just below Shadow Milk’s wound. “As well as heartbreakingly selfless.”

“We were tied,” Shadow Milk mutters, soaking in the touch even with refusal on his lips. “By my own hand.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla hums back. “Even though you lacked intent, you had me at your mercy. You held the power to destroy me and everything I loved – and yet, when I had not the power to refuse you, you chose to save me instead. By your choice, and your choice alone.”

“It was still my fault.”

“Yes.” Pure Vanilla’s words are firm, yet gentled. “Which is why the conflict inside me remains.”

Shadow Milk tenses as Pure Vanilla’s hand comes up to cup his cheek; the touch is so familiar, but the resolve in Pure Vanilla’s gaze is frightening. “Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says quietly, eyes locked with Shadow Milk’s own. “Do you know what matters most to me?”

A pang echoes in Shadow Milk’s heart; he knows the answer, even if it’s not the answer he wants. “The happiness of other Cookies.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla says quietly. “The Light of Truth chose me for this; while I have faltered and been led astray at times, I will always return to this path. A future that ensures the

happiness of all Cookies is what I long for most of all. And that means your happiness too.”

“Fool.” Shadow Milk chuckles weakly. “You claim to care for the happiness of all other Cookies, yet so quickly discard your own for their sake.”

“Yes,” Pure Vanilla affirms. “I do. And I will undoubtedly continue to do so, so long as I am needed.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes flutter shut as Pure Vanilla’s hand traces gently along his cheek. “I know you have been badly hurt,” Pure Vanilla says quietly. “I know you have been rejected and cast aside by Cookiekind. You, whose happiness was dismissed in order to please them, became a Beast to seek a future that would please you and you alone. And yet, you still cared for me so deeply that you stood in harm’s way and broke your hold over me just to keep me safe.”

“Fool,” Shadow Milk repeats hoarsely. “I was still pleasing myself. I did not want you like that.”

“You rejected the lie of me,” Pure Vanilla says quietly, “for my true feelings, knowing there was a chance they were not the same.”

“Are they?” Shadow Milk’s eyes are wide; he is unable to keep the desperation from his voice. He’s run the scenes, played his part – the final curtain call looms large, the spotlights all centered on this moment.

Pure Vanilla’s smile is sad and small. “I don’t know.”

The lights shatter.

Darkness floods the corners of the room, cold and all-consuming; Shadow Milk is unsure of his own expression. All he knows is how quickly Pure Vanilla leans towards him, wrapping him in a half-hug. “Shadow Milk Cookie,” he says hoarsely, his face pressed against Shadow Milk’s neck. “I care for you. So, so much. I want you in my life, by my side. Please – can you listen, just a little longer?”

Empty words. An attempt at mollification, barely registering against the tinny ringing in Shadow Milk’s ears.

“I trust you,” Pure Vanilla promises quietly, “with my life. I know you care for me. I know you will protect me and save me from myself when called upon. You have proven that beyond any doubt, even if you never meant to. And I need that in my life, because I will neglect myself. I will continue to put others first – but I also believe I can trust you to pull me back when I cannot give any more.”

Shadow Milk grips at him, his one good arm clinging tightly to the back of Pure Vanilla’s robes. His mind feels empty and overflowing all at once, a shakiness to his limbs that comes from a new sort of pain.

Trust him.

The darkness seeping through the edges of the room recedes, ever so slightly.

“I want to build a better world,” Pure Vanilla continues softly, “for every Cookie. The same Cookies that have hurt and betrayed you, who I truly believe you can learn to love again if you only give them the chance. I have seen you do it, little by little.” A gentle squeeze, a harsh exhale into Shadow Milk’s neck. “I want you with me as I build that world – but I must have your acceptance that this is the path I will walk, and that the Cookie that walks beside me must be willing to love them with me. Should you choose to come with me, you do not have to be burdened as a Fount of Knowledge, nor exist for revenge as a Beast. All I desire is the company of Shadow Milk Cookie, my dear friend and treasured companion. Whoever he chooses to be.”

Shadow Milk buries his face against the side of Pure Vanilla’s head; the other’s hair tickles, a sea of gold whose gentle vanilla scent does little to calm the rapid beating of Shadow Milk’s heart.

“I care for you, Shadow Milk Cookie.” Pure Vanilla says quietly. “I do. Please, understand this as truth.”

Care is not love. Truth is not kind.

“I fell so deeply for you. With each moment I shared with you, each kindness you showed to me and those I cared for, my love grew. Our games, our dances, our nights in each other’s arm – they were real in every way that mattered, even now. I loved you, and you loved me. Do you still love me?”

“Yes,” Shadow Milk whispers hoarsely.

“Thank you.” Pure Vanilla squeezes him tight. “Thank you for loving me.”

“How wretched.” The laugh that rips Shadow Milk’s throat is ragged and hoarse. “My love destroyed you.”

“It also saved me.” Pure Vanilla smiles against Shadow Milk’s throat. “So, I will repeat myself one final time.” Pure Vanilla pulls back, placing his hand back against Shadow Milk’s cheek with a small smile. “Shadow Milk Cookie – may I ask you something?”

A wry, pathetic smile. In spite of himself, in spite of everything. “You’re,” Shadow Milk croaks, “going to anyway.”

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says gently, “will you let me fall in love with you again?”

The breath catches in Shadow Milk’s throat.

“It felt so wonderful, being in love with you.” Pure Vanilla’s hand smooths gently down Shadow Milk’s cheek. “Perhaps I still am. But – our relationship was built upon a lie. Even if I can trust my feelings, I know you will not trust them in turn. They have been touched by

deceit and you-” Pure Vanilla smiles. “You want the truth. And I want to be able to give it to you, free of any lingering doubts.”

“What are you asking?” Shadow Milk’s wide eyes are searching, despair and hope battling within his chest.

“For time,” Pure Vanilla replies simply. “I do not think this will be resolved in a single afternoon. There is much we have to rectify.” Pure Vanilla’s hand suddenly pinches on Shadow Milk’s cheek, tugging at the dough. “*You* will be apologizing to Dark Cacao Cookie. Sincerely.”

Shadow Milk winces, but does not pull away from the pinch. “That’s it?”

“Of course not.” Pure Vanilla’s grip releases, instantly smoothing over the same spot of dough. “No more terrorizing my meetings just to end them. No more bullying noblewomen just because they dare to fancy me.”

“It wasn’t because she fancied you,” Shadow Milk scowls, irritation overriding his nerves for a moment. “She was rude to me in the markets.”

“Regardless,” Pure Vanilla replies easily, “as I said – there are choices I made that I would not make again. I will be different. You are different too. Perhaps we have been changed irreversibly by the bond. Perhaps not. Which is why I think we need time. You have to decide if this is something you want.”

Shadow Milk exhales shortly; the nerves still prickling through his jam haven’t abated, but the dread eating at him has been partially quelled, at least. “What about you? Mister Other-Cookies-Before-Me? Are you just doing this to keep me happy? Is this something *you* want?” His tone turns accusing and dangerous towards the end, but Pure Vanilla merely offers a smile in reply.

“I know what I want,” Pure Vanilla says simply. “I know I care for you. Whatever care that may be does not waver my resolve. You will not be happy if I simply allow you back into my good graces without a fight, for you would never have trusted me without it. So, no – I am not doing this simply because you want it, because you wouldn’t want it in the first place.” His smile widens. “Right now, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you I loved you, even if I was completely certain. Am I right?”

“I’m...” Shadow Milk licks his dry lips. “Trying to trust you. But...”

“No?”

“No.”

“Quite a paradox you’ve created for yourself,” Pure Vanilla remarks with a smile. “You know I will prioritize your happiness above my own, all while you’re refusing to consider your own above mine.”

There's a snort as Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "Great. So instead of something that makes sense, I'm the one tasked with looking after your happiness, and you're the one looking after mine. How foolish."

"Perhaps." Pure Vanilla's eyes lid fondly. "Then, let us be foolish."

The words send a sharp jolt through Shadow Milk's dough; his eyes widen, but Pure Vanilla's smile only deepens under his disbelieving gaze.

Slowly, a hesitant smile twitches at the corner of Shadow Milk's lips. "It's a mistake, you know. Trying this again."

"Perhaps," Pure Vanilla recites, tracing his hand down the curve of Shadow Milk's jaw. "Then, let us make that mistake."

"We'll keep hurting each other." Shadow Milk's hand reaches up, catching Pure Vanilla's own. "I can't change that quickly."

"I don't need you to." Pure Vanilla's gaze is overwhelmingly fond. "I do not wish for anything but Shadow Milk Cookie – clever, funny, brave and strong. All I ask for is his kindness. Kindness I know he has."

"Hm." Shadow Milk grasps Pure Vanilla's hand tight, giving it a gentle squeeze. "And how long do I have to get it right?"

Pure Vanilla laughs. "As long as it takes. But – hopefully it won't take forever."

Shadow Milk hums; he slumps back against the pillows, eyes half-closing as contentment settles through his dough. "I suppose there's no coming to bed, considering we're already in one. We're off-script, now."

"That's alright." Pure Vanilla's settling back down too, his own eyes fluttering shut. "I'm excited to see something new. I've never fallen in love with someone again before."

"You should be excited." Shadow Milk yawns; now that the adrenaline has left his system, fatigue is creeping in fast. "I'm an excellent playwright. A master at the art of wooing. I'll knock your socks off."

"I don't normally wear them. Or shoes."

"See? I'm already ahead of the game," Shadow Milk mutters sleepily; Pure Vanilla giggles back.

Silence settles over the room; yet, for the first time in a long time, it does not feel strained. There is no darkness, no icy dread settling upon them. There is only the gentle hum of the fan, the slow rise and fall of Pure Vanilla's chest as Shadow Milk matches his breaths to the other's own. Pain remains; still throbbing in his shoulder, still hanging over him with the promise of an uncertain tomorrow. This may be the last time they share a bed like this; it may be the last moment of peace they have at all with the threat of the Beasts bearing down upon them.

Yet, now is not the time for such worries. Shadow Milk is too exhausted to fight the pull of sleep any longer; as his eyes flutter shut, he cannot help but distantly note how remarkably cozy the air around him feels.

The room is warm.

Chapter 27

They start things off slow.

Shadow Milk is still confined to bed rest for several days; not that he agrees with it in the slightest. Pure Vanilla keeps him company when he can during the mornings and evenings, but much of the day is spent either sleeping or arguing with the nurses Pure Vanilla has allowed back into the room. Even if Pure Vanilla seems to be making sure he is never left alone, Shadow Milk is still restless, always uncomfortable and overheated when trapped in the healing bay's cots. Even more annoyingly, the staff Pure Vanilla has chosen to oversee him are just as stubborn as Shadow Milk, and not at all shy about it.

Throughout his long years of existence, Shadow Milk isn't sure he's ever been quite so thoroughly scolded as he is whenever he tries to slip out of bed.

The medicine is disgusting; it does little to help the ache in his shoulder, even if it makes his head pleasantly fuzzy. During the brief moments the nurses change his bandages, Shadow Milk can glimpse the wound still carved into his dough – and the sight isn't pretty. The entry point is blackened and brittle, still crumbling and leaking small spurts of jam whenever Shadow Milk moves the wrong way. It's ugly, but at least he doesn't have to look at it for too long before it's hidden away under a fresh set of bandages.

White Lily Cookie is – trying.

Shadow Milk knows that because he sees her at least once a day, usually during the afternoons. She always glides in like a phantom, ethereal and translucent, all while the nurses immediately clear the room to make way for her. Perhaps they have been asked to give the two of them privacy; perhaps they simply expect some sort of discussion to be taking place they aren't meant to be privy to.

Mercifully, White Lily Cookie does very little talking at all.

Shadow Milk doesn't blame her; the situation is messy to put it mildly, and he doesn't know what he'd say to her in the first place. All discussions are clinical, appraisements of his wound or questions as to his current state. The antitoxin she's whipped up has cleared the poison's effects, but not the damage – damage she doesn't have an easy answer to undo.

“This body was created by Dark Moon Magic,” White Lily Cookie remarks quietly, motioning for Shadow Milk to raise his arm as she inspects the blackened dough. “The life powder concentrate is being rejected and White Magic cannot mend it. The necrotic area doesn't seem to be spreading, but...”

Nor will it get better.

A small price to pay for his life, really. If it was anyone else, Shadow Milk would crack a joke about it, maybe make a quip or two – but White Lily Cookie still unsettles him in a way he may never be able to truly shake off. Even the burning question of Silent Salt Cookie, a

topic Pure Vanilla has dismissed without news over and over, cannot bring Shadow Milk to speak to her.

Elder Faerie Cookie's death hangs in the air between them, a shade that dogs even the briefest of shared glances and always ends in uncomfortable silence.

At least her visits are never too terribly long. She'll leave after a short appraisal and the nurses will re-enter, bustling back towards him like the pack of scolding hens that they are. On rare occasions, a different familiar face will slip inside the room in the interim with a tray in hand – trembling the entire time.

If Pure Vanilla intends to test Shadow Milk Cookie by having Cuccidati Cookie be the one to bring him his medicine, it's not subtle.

The girl never says a word to him, eyes always lowered and trembling as if she expects him to strike at any moment. Shadow Milk never does more than roll his eyes and drink his terrible medicine, but the shaky little thing is always scooting out of the room before he's even set his glass down.

Ugh. Fine. Point taken, Pure Vanilla Cookie.

At least the evenings are enjoyable. After the nurses have left, it's usually just him and Pure Vanilla Cookie left alone in the healing bay, with little to do but talk and play games. It's a sliver of normalcy, something familiar and easy that they fall back into without a second thought – and the anxiety that eats at Shadow Milk's heart is always mollified by the sight of the other entering the bay with a gentle smile.

They talk about everything and nothing, usually over a board game or puzzle Pure Vanilla's brought. Shadow Milk tries again and again to suss out some secret knowledge Pure Vanilla's keeping from him, some sliver of deception every time the other claims the kingdom's perfectly well. Yet, through each suspicious query, Pure Vanilla's reply is unflinching – nothing has happened, they've been left completely alone, but the guards are taking every precaution. He's informed his allies and has the kingdom on as high alert as he can muster – but there's been nothing in nearly two weeks now. Even at the Faerie Kingdom under White Lily Cookie's watchful eyes, there's been not so much as a peep.

Shadow Milk doesn't trust it. At all.

Even digging into the incident in the markets nets Shadow Milk little. When questioned who knew they'd be there, Pure Vanilla doesn't have an answer; he'd been too dazed and pained to recall who they'd passed, only that White Lily Cookie had taken him through the castle on his request to try and ease his mind. Beyond that, he can only recall a self-imposed exile in his own bedroom and writing a few letters, but even those are barely more than a faint memory. Their time apart is murky at best, and Shadow Milk admittedly doesn't like hearing about it any more than he has to.

So, Shadow Milk doesn't bring up his mole theory – yet. Pure Vanilla's too honest to entertain the theory without proof; Shadow Milk can perfectly picture the other's frown and insistence of his staff's good nature should the topic arise. Pure Vanilla's kindness and faith

in others has always been his weak point – but, as the current recipient of such kindness, Shadow Milk doesn't have much of a leg to stand on.

When the evenings finally give way to night and their games are spent, Pure Vanilla will always rise to his feet and wish Shadow Milk a gentle goodnight. Shadow Milk badly wants to follow after every time he leaves; he knows he can't, knows there's always a guard sitting in the room with him so he's never alone – but still, Shadow Milk wants. Pure Vanilla's asked for time and Shadow Milk has to give it to him, but it doesn't erase the pangs of longing that Shadow Milk can't help but dwell on every sleepless night.

The room is warm – but it's not *their* bed. It's not the same.

It takes nearly five full days since he'd awoken, but eventually, finally, Shadow Milk is given tentative permission to move out of the healing bay. He's wide awake now, the ache in his joints reduced to the perpetual dull pain around his shoulder – and Shadow Milk is buzzing with energy because of it. The instant White Lily Cookie sanctions his release, Shadow Milk is out of bed in a flash – true, the rapid movement makes him repulsively dizzy for a moment, but it doesn't dull his glee.

If the nurses are sad to see him go, they don't say it. The feeling is quite mutual.

Shadow Milk is still expected to take his medicine, to get plenty of fluids and rest – is made to promise that he'll take it slow by Pure Vanilla himself. Of course, Shadow Milk's got no intention to do anything of the sort, but Pure Vanilla's strict stare keeps him from immediately bounding out in the open air in front of the other at least. No matter; Shadow Milk already has plans in motion. His body may still be weakened, but Shadow Milk's mind is in a perfect state.

He's ready to hunt.

Whatever Pure Vanilla's soldiers can or can't find is of little relevance; the best secrets hide in the shadows, far beyond where good-natured Cookies might think to look. Luckily, Shadow Milk has two of the best and brightest when it comes to fishing out nasty little secrets – and, with permission from Pure Vanilla Cookie, he's ready to deploy them. True, he'd phrased his request as more of an 'added security' sort of vibe, but Shadow Milk's got it all under control.

Admittedly, the look on Black Sapphire and Candy Apple Cookie's faces had been nothing less than dumbstruck when he'd pulled them from their plane into his room, but at least they'd been willing to listen.

Shadow Milk phrases it like a game; one with strict rules that can under no circumstances be broken. Find the Cookies that don't fit. Report them to Shadow Milk Cookie. Do not disrupt any gathering. Do not be seen as themselves. Most of all, do not harm a single crumb on anyone's head, or Shadow Milk will be very, *very* disappointed with them.

That last bit always works well on Candy Apple Cookie; she looks the most offput by her Vanillian surroundings, but she's also the one Shadow Milk pins with his sharp gaze the hardest. Neither of them really seem to understand what's going on, but they don't have to –

all Shadow Milk has to tell them is that he has big plans in the works, and Silent Salt's soldiers can't be mucking it up for him. The pair accept his explanation without a fuss, and when they don their disguises and leave, Shadow Milk can't help but exhale in relief.

He trusts them to do their job, he does – but he can barely explain his current state to himself, much less them. A matter for another time. No use doing in the present what he can put off for tomorrow.

Shadow Milk isn't one to slack on his own machinations, however; while he may have sent out extra pairs of eyes, he's got the sharpest by far. There may be a lingering promise to not overexert himself, but there's nothing wrong with a little stroll outside of the castle. There's nothing wrong with, say, cloaking himself in the guise of Blackcurrant Cookie during his walk into town. It's just for fun! Nothing serious.

Unfortunately in the limits of his disguise, Shadow Milk is stuck with walking as his only mode of getting around; each step and stumble jostles his shoulder with new aches of pain. For any simple Cookie this wouldn't be much of an issue, but it's not like Shadow Milk is all that practiced in walking to begin with. So he'd gotten comfortable floating from place to place. Sue him!

After the third stumble Shadow Milk gives up entirely. With an irritable flick of his wrist he summons his cane, elongating it until he can comfortably rest his palm and weight atop the pommel to balance himself. It does, admittedly, make the walking a bit easier – but Pure Vanilla better not be around to spot him. Shadow Milk has no intention of falling prey to his own old man jokes if he can help it.

Shadow Milk's extra eyes blink into existence among the shadows lining the streets as he walks; he studies each new Cookie he passes by, scrutinizes each and every trace of magic they carry upon them for familiar flickers of Silent Salt's handiwork. About a half-hour of strolling reveals nothing, but it means very little – if there are scouts at play, they're likely to be hidden away, not simply wandering the markets. Shadow Milk himself gives the area a fairly wide berth, not wanting to recall sour memories quite this early in his morning jaunt.

At least nobody pays Shadow Milk much mind. He's just a simple little Cookie, out for a simple little stroll.

“Blackcurrant Cookie!”

Ah. Well, almost nobody.

A vaguely familiar face jogs into view; Shadow Milk instantly recognizes the other Cookie as a regular at the Crow's Nest Inn, even if he can't immediately put his finger on her name.

“Hey!” The other Cookie raises a hand in greeting, grinning widely. “It's Krumiri Cookie. From the tavern?”

“Of course!” Shadow Milk says with a smile of his own. “What, do you think I'd forget the name of one of my biggest fans?”

Krumiri Cookie laughs; she's got a basket filled with fruits looped over her arm that jostles as she shakes her head. "No, no! Just wanted to say hi. It's been a while since we've seen you, but, well..."

The way she trails off sits oddly with Shadow Milk Cookie; he perks a brow as she gives him an oddly kind once-over. "But, well?" Shadow Milk prompts.

"How are you feeling?" she queries gently. "I'm surprised to see you up and about so soon."

"Excuse me?" Shadow Milk replies bluntly. What, had Pure Vanilla offered some excuse about why he'd been away?

"Here." Krumiri Cookie takes an apple from her basket, reaching out and placing it in Shadow Milk's hand. "It's not much, but it's the best looking one of the bunch. You should take it easy, you know? Eat something! Your dough is so thin."

"Sorry." Shadow Milk blinks at her. "What are we talking about?"

Krumiri Cookie's expression instantly flickers to one of concern. "Oh no," she murmurs, a hand coming up to touch her mouth. "Did you hit your head when you fell?"

When he *fell*?

"I..." Shadow Milk Cookie blinks at her. "Do you have me confused for someone else?"

Krumiri Cookie's hesitation is plain; she looks him over once more before softly asking: "Blackcurrant Cookie... you fell from the roof. After the incident in the markets. Do you remember?"

What.

Apparently the look on Shadow Milk's face is enough to alarm her, as she reaches out and places a steadying hand on his arm. "No, no! It's okay!" she promises. "Do you need me to find someone? I could call a guard, or--"

"I-" Shadow Milk makes a strangled noise, before clenching his eyes and reopening them. "Sorry. If you mean the... beast incident, I believe you're thinking of... Shadow Milk Cookie?"

"Oh!" Her eyes brighten instantly. "Is that your preferred name again?"

What.

"Oh, don't worry. We don't mind either way." Her distress is instantly cleared, a smile back on her face. "I'll make sure to tell the others you're feeling better! We were quite worried about you – but everyone's looking forward to seeing you again once you're up to it! Linga Cookie has been just *dying* to hear how that tale about the sea serpent ends."

Shadow Milk Cookie simply stares, an apple still held loosely in his hand.

“Oh!” Krumiri Cookie glances up. “Goodness! It’s already almost noon. I’m going to be late to my shift.” She then beams at Shadow Milk, offering him a little wave before turning on her heels. “Have a good day, Bl- Shadow Milk Cookie!”

And then she’s gone, leaving Shadow Milk stunned and alone on the empty Vanillian streets.

Infuriatingly, Pure Vanilla is openly amused by Shadow Milk’s flabbergasted retelling of the tale.

“Of course they knew.”

“What do you mean *of course they knew*?” Shadow Milk demands; Pure Vanilla doesn’t even have the decency to look up, sitting at his dresser and brushing out his hair without a care in the world. Shadow Milk is hoveringly irritably overhead, arms folded across his chest. “How could they possibly have known? Did *you* tell them?”

“About your fall? No, news of that spread without my doing. There were quite a lot of Cookies who saw what happened.” Pure Vanilla tugs his brush through a small knot, wincing slightly. “I did send out a cautionary warning through the kingdom, though. The rest was likely them just putting two and two together.”

“Not my *fall*,” Shadow Milk snaps. “How long have they known Blackcurrant Cookie was me?”

“Mm...” Pure Vanilla’s brush pauses as he openly considers. “I think the first time I was drawn aside for questioning was... a day or two after your first appearance there?”

“A day or two,” Shadow Milk repeats in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Pure Vanilla gives him an amused glance. “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. You plastered your face all over my castle, remember? The fact you were my guest was not a very well-kept secret.”

“Did you tell them I was Blackcurrant Cookie?” Shadow Milk demands. “I worked hard on that persona, you know. You had no right to reveal me.”

“I did not reveal you,” Pure Vanilla replies simply. “When asked, I only said that you were a visiting friend, and called yourself Blackcurrant Cookie.”

Ugh. A lie within a truth. He’s getting too good at these.

“Still.” Shadow Milk lets out an irritable huff. “How did they know?”

Pure Vanilla’s brush is set down on the dresser; he turns his attention to Shadow Milk in full, giving him a deeply amused look. “Shadow Milk Cookie,” he says after a moment, “perhaps it has escaped your notice – but there really aren’t that many exceedingly blue Cookies within my kingdom.”

Shadow Milk flushes sharply, his mouth flying open to retort – before snapping shut with a scowl. “Well,” he mutters darkly. “Maybe there should be. Maybe I’ll do something about it.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla’s brow perks. “I didn’t know proliferation was on your to-do list.”

“Prolif-” Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow. “What?”

“Well, let Fresa know if anything comes of it.” Pure Vanilla turns away, picking up his brush again. “She loves sewing baby clothes.”

Shadow Milk stares – until the insinuation clicks and his cheeks flush searing-hot. “I’m not- I didn’t mean *that*! What’s wrong with you?!”

“A pity,” Pure Vanilla says mildly, eyes slipping shut as he resumes brushing at his hair. “I’ve always liked children.”

“Tough.” Shadow Milk floats over to the dresser, sitting down on the edge with a huff. Normally he’d simply settle on the bed but that feels – iffy, where they stand. “Geez, jumping the gun much? We haven’t even had our first date yet.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Pure Vanilla’s eyes crack open for a moment to sneak a glance. “I take it you’ve already made plans?”

“Of course.” Shadow Milk puffs out his chest proudly. “I told you, I’m wooing you. You think I, the great Shadow Milk Cookie, will produce anything less than a spectacle for you? It’ll be the finest feasts and grandest amazements you’ve ever seen. Grandeur on a cosmic level.”

“My, my.” Pure Vanilla smiles, perking a brow. “And when should I expect such a charming escapade?”

Shadow Milk tilts his head, thinking. “Friday?”

“Friday is our dinner with the Crème Republic, remember?”

“Blegh.” Shadow Milk makes a face, sticking out his tongue. “I really have to go?”

Pure Vanilla sets his brush down again, eyes opening in full as he turns towards Shadow Milk. “The Crème Republic is an important ally to my kingdom. The solidarity of our nations was badly damaged by my behavior – and yours. Do not think that Clotted Cream Cookie failed to inform me of your actions at the ball.”

Tattletale.

“I’d like you to go.” Pure Vanilla reaches out, placing a gentle hand on Shadow Milk’s knee. “I know they have a poor opinion of you, and vice-versa. It will not change overnight, but this could be a good first step.”

“Fine. Saturday, then,” Shadow Milk decides. “I’ll be a perfect gentleman at the stuffy old dinner, and Saturday, we can have some real fun. Deal?”

“I am free on Saturday.” Pure Vanilla smiles gently. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“You should be.” Shadow Milk runs a hand carelessly through his hair, tossing his head with the movement. “Honestly, I’ve outdone myself with this line-up. I have the most extravagant, show-stopping delights you’ve ever seen.”

Shadow Milk has nothing.

It’s not like he doesn’t have options; it’s simply that he has far too many. Shadow Milk’s spent the next two nights poring over maps of Earthbread, pulling up hazy illusions from memory of the best spots and sights he’s seen over the years. Fantastic beasts and dazzling scenic views all swirl in a panorama of color before him – they’re all incredible, take Shadow Milk’s breath away just to recall.

The problem is that none of them are *right*.

Even if Shadow Milk could make up his mind, the bigger issue is that none of the places he likes best are within a reasonable distance for an evening flight. Pure Vanilla is ill-suited for his portals; even if the other was willing, Shadow Milk has no intention of souring the mood with impromptu immersion therapy. Which only leaves places they’ve been before, which are – fine, but they’re not enough. They’re not spectacular, nothing that will leave a lasting first impression for what might be an eternity together.

Shadow Milk cannot mess this up. Not under any circumstances.

He goes to Black Raisin Cookie.

Perhaps fairly, she promptly gives him the boot, citing their pact of *No Pure Vanilla Troubles* they’d made so long ago. Even Shadow Milk’s pitiful puppy-dog eyes and gestures to his injured shoulder don’t win her over, only getting him a sigh and shake of her head.

“I don’t want to get involved in this,” she says sternly, boots clacking on the ground as she strides forward on patrol. “I am not being held responsible if this blows up in your face.”

“Oh, come on!” Shadow Milk whines, flopping over limply in the air. “You must have *some* idea of what he likes! Some clue to point me in the right direction!”

“You lived with him for months,” Black Raisin Cookie replies exasperatedly. “You already know what he likes.”

“I know the *boring* things he likes.” Shadow Milk waves a dismissive hand towards a nearby flowerbed. “Plants. Helping people. Smelly old sheep.”

“Yes. That is what he likes.” Black Raisin Cookie gives Shadow Milk a passive once-over. “So why are you over-thinking it?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Because it has to be amazing. Extravagant. A show-stopping marvel of wonder.”

“Sorry,” Black Raisin Cookie says mildly. “Is all this meant to be for Pure Vanilla Cookie? Or for yourself?”

“It’s-”

Shadow Milk stops in his tracks.

Huh.

“All I’m saying,” Black Raisin Cookie continues patiently, “is that all of these fantastical visions you’ve been describing don’t sound anything like him. If you’re trying to make Pure Vanilla Cookie happy – maybe scale it back a bit?”

“...Hm,” Shadow Milk says after a moment, gaze drifting as he thinks. “That’s...”

Not the worst idea.

What would scaling it back even look like? Something smaller still has to be meaningful, still dazzling – just, maybe in a different sort of way? Pure Vanilla’s definitely the sentimental type. A call-back to one of their previous encounters, perhaps? Another moonlit dance? No; the image of Pure Vanilla’s empty eyes reflecting moonlight are too vivid, too uncomfortable. The Blue Moon garden is also certainly an idea, but it feels... too soon to try that again.

There is one other garden that comes to mind, though.

“Alright,” Shadow Milk decides, straightening up. “Notes taken. I’ll submit some... revisions to my plans.”

“Great.” Black Raisin Cookie rolls her eyes, smiling as she turns a corner. “Now beat it. I’m working.”

“Hey, I thought you weren’t going to help me at all,” Shadow Milk drawls, floating after. “Who says I don’t want to stick around for more tips?”

“I gave you one tip, and that’s all you’re getting.” Black Raisin shoots him an amused look. “You took an arrow for my friend and my king. That earns you *one* piece of Pure Vanilla advice, and no more.”

“Pricy.” Shadow Milk perks a brow. “What do I need for two?”

“You can’t afford it.” Black Raisin Cookie nods towards her surroundings. “Speaking of – have you found anything?”

“No,” Shadow Milk sighs. Annoyingly, it’s been several days now and neither Black Sapphire nor Candy Apple Cookie have turned up hide nor hair of any constructs hiding in the city. They’ve come back to deliver reports several times now; while the housewife gossip that Black Sapphire eagerly shares is of mild interest, none of it is relevant to what Shadow Milk’s looking for. Worse, it feels like each time they speak, he has to rein Candy Apple Cookie in over and over to convince her away from smashing every Pure Vanilla Cookie statue she sees.

Her acclimation to this sort of life may take the longest.

At least her report on the castle had been mildly enlightening; there'd been no new staff reported on the sign-in lists, no sign of strange activity that Candy Apple's eager little eyes had been able to pick out. There's not a whiff of the Beast's familiar traces of magic anywhere Shadow Milk's been able to scent himself. If Silent Salt's minions were amongst the staff, they're long gone.

The overall lack of news is still perplexing – all of it is, because none of it fits Silent Salt's usual modus operandi. Usually by now, even if an assassination had failed, there'd be some sort of movement. Another attempt, random chaos in the streets, some form of disruption is always the ripple before Silent Salt strikes. There's never just –

Silence.

Huh. Well. It's on theme, at least.

Still, it sets Shadow Milk on edge. Pure Vanilla's cautious optimism that Silent Salt had withdrawn does little to soothe Shadow Milk's far more suspicious mind. Even if there had been some second thoughts – doubtful, nothing stood between the Beasts and their Soul Jams – it doesn't make sense for not even a trace of the usual scouts to be spotted in the city, especially with Shadow Milk's keen nose for magic.

So what's going on? It's too new, too unsettling – and unfortunately, the answers Shadow Milk needs aren't readily available. There are, granted, two places he could go; but they're hardly ideal. Trying to enter the Land of Silence without Silent Salt's permission is a death sentence, and Shadow Milk would rather not set foot in Dark Enchantress Cookie's laboratorium again if he can help it.

Would Silent Salt even be there in the first place?

Too many questions and little to no answers. Shadow Milk had, frankly, expected some sort of massive battle by now – a fiery inferno of his own making, setting salty constructs aflame to purge the outskirts of the Vanilla Kingdom in a blaze of glory. Some sort of grand stand to stake his claim and make it perfectly clear that his new domain was not to be touched.

So much for theatrics.

“Shadow Milk Cookie?”

Shadow Milk blinks; Black Raisin Cookie is giving him a funny look. “Hm?”

“You alright? You went quiet there for a bit.”

“Just thinking.” Shadow Milk folds his arms across his chest. “I'll let you know if I hear anything.”

“Sounds good.” Black Raisin Cookie nods to the right. “I'm heading to the tavern once I'm done with patrol. You wanna meet up later? We could finish up our game of darts. You still owe me a round.”

“Can’t,” Shadow Milk sighs. “Would love to, but can’t. Unfortunately, I’ve been roped into other plans tonight.”

“Oh?” Black Raisin Cookie queries. “And what are those?”

Shadow Milk makes a face again.

“I have to go to a dinner.”

--

It’s not the worst dinner party Shadow Milk’s ever sat through.

Pure Vanilla thanks him for dressing immaculately – not that Shadow Milk would be caught dead in anything less – and is, by all accounts, an admirable escort through the embassy’s halls. They don’t link arms as they had at the ball, but Pure Vanilla remains at Shadow Milk’s side as a reassuring constant throughout the night. Drinks are served in the lounge, along with admittedly excellent cocktail weenies that keep Shadow Milk’s mouth occupied and out of trouble for the most part.

The dignitaries don’t really try to engage in conversation with him, which Shadow Milk is both annoyed and relieved by. Annoying to be outshone once again by Pure Vanilla’s mere presence, but a relief to have minimal participation expected of him.

Clotted Cream Cookie, frustratingly, seems to be the most interested in trying to start up a conversation that Shadow Milk has to keep nimbly avoiding. With each simpering smile from the other, it grows increasingly difficult to keep Lady Milk Crown Cookie from resurfacing.

She wants to slap him so, so bad.

Luckily they’re called for dinner before long, and the meal itself is actually quite good. Shadow Milk enjoys fine Jelly Hams and fairly decent drink, zoning out of the conversation at large and only being brought back in whenever Pure Vanilla gently brushes his knee to summon his attention.

There’s a few probing questions about himself that Shadow Milk dismisses with ease; the nice thing about dinner parties is that no one wants to be impolite, and a few half-truths followed by quickly popping more food into his mouth dissuades most from trying to keep the conversation flowing. Shadow Milk is largely left in peace, which leaves him free to retreat into his own mind as he goes down his mental list of things to do.

He’s already taken the afternoon to gather most of what he needs for Saturday – but there’s still a few finishing touches he has left. His trip to the Dragon’s Valley had left him remarkably singed, but he’d been unable to find what he’d been looking for. Perhaps a shop might sell it in Dragon’s City instead?

Shadow Milk is so preoccupied in his own head that the night manages to pass without incident. That in and of itself is an immense success in Shadow Milk's opinion; luckily, it's also an opinion that seems to be shared by Pure Vanilla himself. The other's contented smile is a sign of victory, to say nothing of the way he gently rests his head against Shadow Milk's good shoulder on the carriage ride back.

"Thank you for coming with me."

"Yeah, yeah," Shadow Milk hums back; he's still partially distracted, still going down his mental list. "At least the food was good."

"You were very quiet at dinner." Pure Vanilla shifts, his head raising slightly. "I think that surprised them."

"Well, I've got a lot on my mind." Shadow Milk's eyes squint slightly as he tries to recall – had it been on Durian Island? Or Melon Turtle Island?

"What are you thinking about?"

"My plans," Shadow Milk replies simply. "My grand schemes. Saturday's tomorrow, you know."

"I know." Pure Vanilla's settling back in, eyes lidding as he lets out a soft, contented sigh. "I'm excited."

"You don't sound it."

"Just tired." Pure Vanilla smiles slightly. "There's a lot of talking at these things. I know you weren't paying attention to most of it, but there was quite a bit of tension in the air at the start."

"I noticed," Shadow Milk replies easily. "Clotted Cream Cookie was very insistent on trying to pull me into that."

"Thank you for not giving in." Pure Vanilla's hand comes to rest on Shadow Milk's own. "He's actually quite an admirable young man. He always has the Crème Republic's best interests at heart, but he has been a steadfast ally to the Vanilla Kingdom as well."

"He's pompous."

"He's a politician." Pure Vanilla yawns, eyes slipping shut. "I will say though, you surprised me. You were much more reserved than I expected. I thought I'd see at least a floating gravy boat or two."

"I was distracted. Though," Shadow Milk adds slyly, "I didn't restrain myself entirely."

Pure Vanilla's eyes snap open in an instant. "What did you do?"

Shadow Milk grins. "You know that line of portraits in the hall near the dining room?"

A sigh before Pure Vanilla replies: “Yes. What have you done to them?”

“I nudged them.”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “Nudged them?”

“Well,” Shadow Milk smirks, “more like continuously nudged them. Just a teensy little spellwork, so that every time someone looks at them, one of the portraits will be *juuuust* slightly askew. And no matter how many times they might try to fix it, every time they look away, it’ll happen again.”

A beat of silence; Pure Vanilla’s looking him over, expression unreadable before a tiny smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. Shadow Milk grins back at him, savoring the reluctant amusement glittering in Pure Vanilla’s eyes.

“You,” Pure Vanilla says finally, “are mischief incarnate.”

“Thank you,” Shadow Milk says proudly. “Sometimes the subtle touch is the most effective.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles, his eyes slipping shut as he relaxes back against Shadow Milk’s shoulder. “I fear you’ll drive them completely mad. The spell isn’t permanent, is it?”

“Relax. It’ll wear off in a day or two.” Shadow Milk rests his cheek against Pure Vanilla’s head. “Besides, you shouldn’t be thinking about that stuffy old dinner. You should be conserving your energy for our date.”

A soft hum as Pure Vanilla sighs to himself. “Yes. You’ve got a lot planned, haven’t you?”

“I told you, it’ll be a spectacle.” Shadow Milk gives Pure Vanilla’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Cosmic wonder and delights from across the ages. You’ll walk out a changed Cookie.”

Pure Vanilla’s lips twitch with a wry smile. “Sounds exhausting.”

“Yes. So sleep.” Shadow Milk gives Pure Vanilla’s head a gentle nudge. “Also - don’t think I was completely distracted at dinner. You barely ate a thing.”

“I don’t like oysters,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back.

“Then why did you let them serve you it?”

Another yawn as Pure Vanilla slumps further against Shadow Milk. “I didn’t want to be rude.”

“Pitiful,” Shadow Milk replies, voice fond. “You’re having some Jellies once we get back.”

Pure Vanilla doesn’t reply; he’s already drifting off, a warmth pressed to Shadow Milk’s side as the carriage rumbles over the cobblestones. The feeling is familiar, a soothing bit of comfort that Shadow Milk soaks in as his own eyes slip shut. He can feel Pure Vanilla breathing against him, a slow rise and fall that lulls Shadow Milk closer to the edges of his own slumber.

Shadow Milk will need his own rest. There's quite a few places left to go, and Saturday's dawn looms ever closer.

He has to get this right.

--

Morning comes and goes without incident; Shadow Milk is rushing, but he manages to finish the last stages of his plan without too much issue. Yes, he's still burnt and crispy from scouring the Scovillian plains, but it's nothing a quick dust-off and a spritz of berry perfume won't fix. After that it's a simple matter of dressing himself, fixing his hair, and waiting for Pure Vanilla to finish up a round of afternoon meetings.

It should be a simple matter, anyway.

Shadow Milk finds himself, once again, standing in front of the mirror without a clue what to wear. He hasn't had the time to pull up the latest men's suits; Lady Milk Crown Cookie had demanded the most premier fashion around, but Shadow Milk Cookie is finding himself distinctly lacking. Even his hair doesn't fall how he wants; a high, then low ponytail is tried, then a loose braid – though that's difficult for his eyes to see out of, so he discards it. Each new outfit and style never feels like it settles properly on his dough.

Eventually, Shadow Milk just gives up and reverts to his old form. He's perfectly aware that Pure Vanilla will be showing up in his standard robes; there's really no reason to change what works.

Shadow Milk does, however, add a blue primrose to his hair, tucked just below his wisps of white. A little inside joke, just for him – and a prelude, if Pure Vanilla's paying attention.

The rest of the afternoon is spent waiting on Pure Vanilla's balcony; when the sun's just begun to dip below the horizon, the door to the chambers opens and Pure Vanilla steps inside. He doesn't look any worse for the wear; a little tired, but that's to be expected. Shadow Milk patiently waits, sat on the railing as the other bustles into the room with a stifled yawn.

"Took you long enough," Shadow Milk remarks loudly; this earns a start from Pure Vanilla, who immediately turns his head towards the noise. A blink before Pure Vanilla's crossing the room, opening up the balcony doors and slipping through.

"Shadow Milk Cookie," Pure Vanilla says with a tired smile. "Were you waiting long?"

"Oh, every moment always feels too long without you," Shadow Milk replies smoothly, idly kicking his legs back and forth.

Pure Vanilla blinks. "What are you doing?"

"I've already told you, I'm wooing you." Shadow Milk's eyes flutter. "My darling."

That earns him, of all things, a giggle. “Oh, goodness,” Pure Vanilla’s cheeks have taken on a brighter hue. “That’s... very nice of you.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “You’re so unromantic.” He nods towards the room. “You ready to go?”

“Shouldn’t I get changed?” Pure Vanilla picks at his robe with one hand. “I’ve been in this all day.”

“You’re fine,” Shadow Milk dismisses. “I don’t need you in finery to enjoy you. Beautiful,” he tacks on at the end.

Pure Vanilla’s flush deepens; there’s another laugh, albeit slightly more nervous. “Oh. Um... alright.” He then adds: “I like your flower.”

“Thank you.” Shadow Milk pushes himself to his feet before leaning over and extending a hand. “Shall we, then?”

Pure Vanilla steps forward, taking the offered hand with a smile. “And where might we be going?”

Shadow Milk’s magic pulses through the touch; in an instant, Pure Vanilla is lifted up to float beside him as reality melts away around them. The golden hues of evening are replaced by an endless starry sky, endless and glittering with comets that trail across the expanse. The world around them is gone, replaced only by a sea of shifting blues that shiver as Shadow Milk trails his hand through the air.

Pure Vanilla looks completely starstruck; Shadow Milk smiles to himself, gliding backwards as he tugs the other forward. “What, you’re impressed by this?”

“It’s beautiful.” Pure Vanilla’s staff raises and turns every which way, taking in the sights. “Is this the cosmic wonder you promised?”

“Of course not.” Shadow Milk leads Pure Vanilla on as they glide through the air, a river of starlight rippling all around them. “This is just the appetizer. A little something for you to look at on the flight.”

“Flight?” Pure Vanilla lowers his staff, returning his curious gaze to Shadow Milk. “Are we going far?”

“Very far,” Shadow Milk replies with a grin. “First, I’ve got us a table at the fanciest restaurant in Crispia. It’s suit-and-tie only, by the way.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla glances hesitantly at his robes. “But, I’m not-”

“Then,” Shadow Milk sing-songs, “we’ll be heading to Parfaedia for the Broadway production of The Sound of Muesli. Front-row seats, no expense spared.”

“That’s – quite far.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is taking on an edge of concern, but his eyes are locked on Shadow Milk alone. They continue drifting farther from the castle, Shadow Milk

gently guiding Pure Vanilla along through the illusionary sky. “Shadow Milk Cookie, how did you afford-?”

“Finally,” Shadow Milk interrupts, “we’ll be heading to Snowfall Village for the best ice cream you’ve ever tasted. I’ve also hired their town choir to stand at our table and sing for you while you eat.”

Pure Vanilla flushes, exasperation and dismay plain on his face. “Shadow Milk-”

“Oh, wait.” Shadow Milk clicks his tongue. “That was the *old* plan.”

“Old plan?” Pure Vanilla repeats weakly.

Shadow Milk nods, smiling ear to ear; the pair descend as one, Shadow Milk pulling Pure Vanilla downwards until they alight in a small patch of blackened grass. It is the only piece of reality breaking through Shadow Milk’s masterful illusion; he savors it, and Pure Vanilla’s confusion until he finally dispels the mirage with a flick of his wrist. The darkness is swept away in an instant as the world around them comes back into view with startling clarity.

They’re in the gardens, surrounded by a large swath of withered flowers on every side – flowers that Shadow Milk had so carelessly destroyed all those nights ago. Flowers that, along the garden path, are now surrounded by a colorful array of potted plants on every side.

Pure Vanilla blinks in open astonishment.

“This,” Shadow Milk continues casually, “is the new plan. I know they aren’t lilies, but this assortment took me quite a bit to put together.”

“They’re...” Pure Vanilla’s gaze travels over the pots all around him.

“A colorful bunch, I know.” Shadow Milk points from pot to pot. “There’s some Snapping Dragon Orchids – very rare, very snappy if you don’t water them every day. The Daffodoughs have always been a favorite of mine, but the Cinnazinnias were definitely the hardest to find. Took hours around the Milkyway Lake to spot a patch. Oh!” Shadow Milk lets go of Pure Vanilla’s hand, floating over to the largest flower of them all and motioning to it with a grin. “Not bad, eh? Biggest Chrysanthemuffin I could find. And don’t worry – these will all do just fine in the climate around here. I checked.”

Pure Vanilla’s still staring at him, but it’s a look of wonder; Shadow Milk’s grin widens as he does a brief twirl in the air, hands behind his back. “Well?”

“You...” Pure Vanilla’s stepping forward, trailing a hand gently against a Tulip Tart’s petals. “These are for me?”

“Naturally,” Shadow Milk drawls. “What, you actually thought I was going to take you on some whirlwind adventure? At your age? Psht!” Shadow Milk throws his arms up in an exaggerated shrug. “What would an old man like you do with all that? And at the end of a long day no less! Honestly, I can’t believe you fell for that whole cosmic wonder bit. Hilarious!”

“This is our date?” Pure Vanilla says softly; there’s a smile on his lips, even if he’s briefly turned away. “You’re taking me gardening?”

“Ding ding ding!” Shadow Milk performs a pirouette in the air, before dipping into a low bow. “Honestly, we can’t let such an ugly patch of blight persist in Pure Vanilla Cookie’s garden, can we? Better to add in a splash of color!” Shadow Milk suddenly claps his hands together; on either side, two sealed baking dishes appear floating in mid-air. “And before I forget, dinner’s already handled. I got that Ryesotto you’re so fond of from that shop on the corner, and Berry Wriggly Tarts for dessert.”

Pure Vanilla’s watching him, an unmistakable smile on his face accompanying a lidded gaze. He wordlessly reaches a hand up; Shadow Milk floats down as bidden, allowing Pure Vanilla to draw him close as he grins broadly at the other. Pure Vanilla’s eyes trace over Shadow Milk for a moment – then there’s a touch, a palm cupping Shadow Milk’s jaw before Pure Vanilla leans in.

A kiss, chaste and gentle, pressed to the side of Shadow Milk’s cheek.

It’s over as quickly as it’d begun, but when Pure Vanilla pulls back, there is nothing but open fondness in his eyes. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “This is wonderful, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk ignores the flush on his own cheeks, puffing out his chest proudly at the words. “Hah! Of course it is. What, you really expected anything less?”

“I did,” Pure Vanilla admits freely. “You tricked me.”

“You were so nervous, weren’t you?” Pure Vanilla’s hand is still resting against Shadow Milk’s cheek, a gentle touch he’s unwilling to pull away from. “You thought I was going to run you ragged.”

“You have a sense of grandeur few could hope to match,” Pure Vanilla chuckles. “I was prepared to enjoy, and endure – but this is so much better than I’d hoped for.”

“Oh, please,” Shadow Milk replies, finally pulling away if only to take Pure Vanilla’s hand in his own. “You think I don’t know you after all this time? You’re Pure *Vanilla* Cookie. Why would you want to bask in finery when you could get muddy in the dirt instead? I knew exactly what to do all along.”

Pure Vanilla gives him a once-over before wryly remarking: “That first plan was oddly specific for a fake-out.”

“I,” Shadow Milk proclaims, “am the master of Deceit. I plan out all my lies carefully.”

“I see,” Pure Vanilla replies with a smile. “It wasn’t from having second thoughts?”

“Second thoughts just mean I took twice as long to think about it,” Shadow Milk retorts; Pure Vanilla merely chuckles once more.

“This is lovely,” Pure Vanilla says quietly. “And I’m very happy. Thank you, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Shadow Milk openly preens, tossing his head to the side. “Of course you are. I’m courting you, and I’m excellent at it. Like all things I put my mind to.”

“I do feel thoroughly courted.” Pure Vanilla gives Shadow Milk’s hand a squeeze before dropping the touch and bustling over to the nearest pot. “Now – will you be helping me with the replanting? I don’t know if I can carry these all by myself.”

“I will help,” Shadow Milk proclaims with a flourishing bow. He then straightens, and adds: “But I’m not getting muddy. I have my limits.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles, already bending down to dig his hands in the potted soil. “Well, we can’t have the handsomest, cleverest Cookie in all of Earthbread getting dirty, now can we?”

Shadow Milk’s flush deepens before he instantly waves it away with a flick of his hand. “Hah! So true.” A pause. “But... if you need more help, I can... endure a few specks of mud. Briefly. Begrudgingly.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Pure Vanilla glances up, motioning with his head to the right. “Can you go get my tools? I’ll need a trowel.”

“Oh. Right.” Shadow Milk turns on his heels, scanning the garden until his eyes land upon a familiar green shed. He gives Pure Vanilla another mock-bow before gliding away, humming to himself as he goes.

The flight over doesn’t take long, less than a few seconds; Shadow Milk is so pleased with himself that he doesn’t register the shift in the air at first. It isn’t until he’s placed his hand on the shed door that something wafts past his nose – something that makes his dough stiffen instantly. There’s a single beat of shock before Shadow Milk’s slamming open the shed door, fangs bared-

A wisp of Dark Moon Magic drifts delicately past his eyes.

It’s gone in an instant, fading away into the evening air as if it had never existed. But Shadow Milk can still smell the acrid scent in the air, can taste the spellwork that had been cast moments ago.

Someone had been here, and escaped him with seconds to spare.

Shadow Milk hovers in the doorway, mind racing as his hand digs into the wooden frame; he must freeze there for too long, because his stupor is only broken by the sound of Pure Vanilla’s voice carrying through the air.

“Shadow Milk Cookie? Is it in there?”

A blink as Shadow Milk shakes his head; he grabs the handbag of tools, giving it a quick once-over for any lingering spells – there’s nothing, at least. Wordlessly he turns, teleporting away and reappearing in front of Pure Vanilla in an instant.

“Oh!” Pure Vanilla starts in surprise. “There you are.” Shadow Milk silently hands him the bag; his expression can’t be good, based on the way Pure Vanilla’s brow furrows. “Is everything alright?”

Shadow Milk closes his eyes – then reopens them with a bright smile on his face. “Ugh! It smells in there. When was the last time you cleaned that shed? It’s full of spiders.”

“The spiders can live there if they like.” Pure Vanilla’s still looking him over, concern still plain on his face. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Shadow Milk replies simply. “Just thinking.”

“Oh?” Pure Vanilla’s turning away again, fishing out his trowel from the bag. “What about?”

The image of the Laboratorium looms large in Shadow Milk’s mind, along with the cloying scent of burning dough and piercing screams that echo in his ears.

“Just planning a little trip.”

Chapter 28

There are three problems to work out before Shadow Milk can go.

The first is obvious, but also the most troubling. It's an enigma that Shadow Milk is still sorting out the pieces to every moment he has a chance. Whenever his mind strays he finds it returning again and again to puzzle out the facts in front of him, as conflicting as they may be.

Silent Salt Cookie does not use Dark Moon Magic.

A lot may have changed since their... rebirth, but of this, Shadow Milk is quite certain. Silent Salt's skill with the blade has ever been unquestioned; while the constructs that serve as soldiers are indeed propelled by magical forces, Black Magic draws upon the cosmic void, not the moon. Throughout all their long history together, Shadow Milk has not once seen the other wield such magic, much less to such potent effect as to escape him by mere seconds. It seems equally unlikely that an unthinking construct soldier would manage to conjure such powerful magics either.

There are only three other Cookies in the current era that Shadow Milk has seen dabble in his personal brand of spellcraft – and Pure Vanilla had been busy playing in the dirt at the time. Which only left two feasible options for who had been hiding in that shed, and neither of them are pleasant answers.

White Lily Cookie... and Dark Enchantress Cookie.

Both potentials are extremely complicated, in extremely different ways. White Lily Cookie's unconscious apparition rests within the gardens – Shadow Milk's gone back to check on it thrice now – but that's not enough to draw a conclusion from. White Lily Cookie has, by and large, vacated her consciousness to focus on the Faerie Kingdom's defenses; Shadow Milk himself hasn't seen her move about in weeks. Pure Vanilla has remarked on speaking with her from time to time, but it's for short bursts and little more than check-ups to make sure everything is still alright on his end.

Even if she does return, Shadow Milk's self-perceived truce with White Lily Cookie hangs by a precarious thread. There's no easy way to approach and simply ask if she'd been spying on them. If she had, Shadow Milk expects she has every reason to deny it; if she hadn't, he's made a baseless accusation that strains their already-tentative peace.

It's almost preferable if the answer lies in Dark Enchantress Cookie's hands – though that implies something much, much more dangerous.

Dark Moon Magic had been at the heart of the Laboratory's experiments; while Dark Enchantress Cookie had clearly had some experience in the matter, the bulk of their progress had been guided by Shadow Milk's masterful hands. The arcane symbols of his magic had been emblazoned on every test chamber, which are no doubt still blazing with sickly light even now. Shadow Milk had taught Butter Roll Cookie and those insipid little researchers

everything they needed to know, all in pursuit of his new, perfect body. Whatever Dark Enchantress Cookie had asked of him, he'd told her, too.

The scholarly instinct in him dies hard. Unfortunately.

Yet it still feels wildly unlikely that Dark Enchantress Cookie herself would be hiding in some cramped shed in Pure Vanilla's garden. Had it been one of her minions? Someone low-level enough to be stuck in the spider-shed that's still skilled enough to wield such magic seems equally unlikely. Dark Moon Magic is not for the faint of heart, thank you very much. Still... teaching a semi-skilled caster a portal spell is not completely impossible, especially under the tutelage of Dark Enchantress Cookie.

Worse, it's not the last time Shadow Milk's scented unfamiliar Dark Moon Magic in the air, and all of them center around the castle. The other occurrences have been no more than a whiff, much less concrete than when he'd ripped open the garden shed. Yet every so often, Shadow Milk will pinpoint a disturbance nearby and rush to the scene, only to find the paltry remnants of whatever spell had been cast as little more than a dying ember. It almost feels as if someone is taunting him, beckoning him after them just to slip out of his grasp every time.

None of it makes any sense, is completely off-script from anything Shadow Milk's seen before. Silent Salt's scouts that should be infiltrating the Vanilla Kingdom are completely absent. Dark Moon Magic that should be wielded by only the most powerful of mages is showing up in garden sheds and broom closets. There've been no attacks, no shows of force, yet an ominous presence hangs in the air. It feels like Shadow Milk's missing a key piece of the puzzle, but the only possible clues will be found in the last place he wants to be.

Shadow Milk has to go back to the Laboratorium. He knows this as an ugly truth, a fact of life he can only put off for so long. The chance of running into Silent Salt or Dark Enchantress Cookie there is higher than anywhere else; even if it's dangerous, Shadow Milk can't live on the precipice of potential disaster forever.

Which leads him to his second problem – shoring up the Vanilla Kingdom's defenses.

After two weeks of searching, it's become abundantly clear that there's no scouts to be found. Black Sapphire Cookie has exhausted every avenue of the local gossip networks; if the little old granny Cookies who watch the streets through binoculars all day have nothing to give him, there's nothing to be found. As amusing as it is to hear Black Sapphire exhaustedly recount how many pastries he's been force-fed to keep them happy, it's also strangely reassuring to hear how thoroughly the other has dedicated himself to his craft.

Agreeing to give Goat Fig Cookie's grandson a call in exchange for the neighborhood watch's report had definitely been overkill, but Shadow Milk appreciates Black Sapphire's effort nonetheless.

It's... fairly clear that Black Sapphire's cottoned on to him by now. While the other has made no outright statements, there's a few casual remarks here and there that earn a few side-glances from Shadow Milk himself. It's impossible to keep the news out of Black Sapphire's hands – it is his job, after all – but at the very least, he doesn't seem too bothered by it. If

anything, Black Sapphire's veiled comments contain more curiosity than anything; but as long as nothing is asked outright, Shadow Milk doesn't have to answer.

Candy Apple Cookie remains as energetic as ever; while there's no news on her front, she's managed to amass a series of personas in the kingdom that dwarfs even Shadow Milk's numbers. Shadow Milk can pick her out of a crowd in an instant, but it seems she's wearing a different form each time, slipping from role to role as easily as breathing. The only constant seems to be a new friend she's made in Jacaranda Cookie, whose booth Shadow Milk constantly spies Candy Apple Cookie frequenting.

He's not sure where Candy Apple's storing all the newly-commissioned merch of him she's been getting, and he's not about to ask.

At least her own assimilation into the Vanilla Kingdom crowds seemed to have put her mind at ease a little. She still scowls whenever she sees a painting or statue of Pure Vanilla's likeness, but she's stopped trying to destroy them outright. It's progress, even if it may only be a result of her method acting carrying over. She's still keeping an eye on the streets for him, but he's not about to assign her to guard duty any time soon.

That's what Shadow Milk Cookie himself is for.

He still hasn't told Pure Vanilla Cookie about the Dark Moon Magic in the garden, which is where problems two and three begin to bleed together. Shadow Milk's done his best to erect subtle wards of guarding, scattered runes of his own making he's hidden out of sight around the kingdom and castle. He can't place a barrier outright on Pure Vanilla's bedroom without the other noticing, but he can etch a protection spell beneath the floorboards. He can't openly sleep in Pure Vanilla's room to guard him through the night, but he can sneak in and curl up in the shadowy crack in the ceiling to keep watch for intruders.

Shadow Milk can't give in to his growing paranoia and secretly trail Pure Vanilla around throughout the day – except he can and he does, because his anxious mind won't let him do anything else.

Pure Vanilla is an incredibly powerful mage. He is not in need of protection, has proved himself on the battlefield time and time again. Pure Vanilla had been at the most risk when he'd been weakened and disoriented, a condition he firmly lacks now. Even then, Pure Vanilla's injury from the incident seems to have been healed off effortlessly, while Shadow Milk's still bearing the pains of his own. Pure Vanilla Cookie, by all accounts, should be perfectly fine without Shadow Milk's watchful gaze.

But there's always a chance, and that's exactly what Shadow Milk cannot bear.

Perhaps it's because their time together has been lessened, but it feels as if it's become even more precious than before. They have dinners together, real ones; still often in the comfort of Pure Vanilla's bedroom, but there's also trips to restaurants now. Sometimes Shadow Milk picks the place, sometimes Pure Vanilla, but there's always something new to be learned every time they sit down at the table.

Shadow Milk still wears the guise of Blackcurrant Cookie when they eat in public; even with curious eyes upon him, he can at least tell himself it's from Pure Vanilla's presence. There's still some level of discomfort with being so openly perceived like this, an unpleasant uneasiness that persists in wondering who is seeing through him. Even though Shadow Milk says nothing about it, Pure Vanilla seems to pick up on said discomfort; by the fifth time they go out to eat, Shadow Milk starts noticing a pattern of private booth requests - or at least, a table that's a little more sequestered than the rest.

It's nice. It allows the din of the restaurants to be quieted by their relative seclusion, while still not isolating them entirely. The muffled noise allows them to converse more easily - and talking with Pure Vanilla like this is never, ever boring. Their conversations are an exquisite learning opportunity, filled to the brim with new information that Shadow Milk drinks in greedily.

Pure Vanilla Cookie doesn't like shellfish.

It's not just oysters; he's not fond of lobster, or even crab legs for that matter. The smell of hot artichoke is displeasing to him, but he really enjoys baking bread whenever he has the time. Sometimes, despite how hard the life had been, Pure Vanilla finds himself missing his home in the village, and how the smell of fresh bread wafting out his windows had always brought the children running to his door for a slice. Though some villagers have moved away rather than remain in the Vanilla Kingdom, Pure Vanilla still takes time to write to them as often as he can.

Despite being a gardener at heart, Pure Vanilla thinks Carbnations are a little ugly. He likes candy corn and mint, but can't stomach licorice. Pure Vanilla loves romantic comedies, and can tolerate horror movies but will sneakily shut his staff's eye when no one's looking. His favorite book is Crumb and Punishment and no, he will not read Fifty Shades of Grain, he's already wise to Shadow Milk's teasing. Pure Vanilla likes Cream Cats, but has never kept a pet beyond tending to his family's sheep. He misses his parents dearly.

He's loved before.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is fond of having his hand held. He adores being taken to exotic places when time permits, and resting against Shadow Milk on the beach to end the day. He's more than happy to dance when it's just the two of them around, and even seems to enjoy the aerial waltzes Shadow Milk will happily drag him into when allowed. When the evenings have turned to night and they're finally ready to part ways, Pure Vanilla likes to end their farewells with a kiss to Shadow Milk's cheek.

Shadow Milk likes that too.

Pure Vanilla Cookie becomes butter in Shadow Milk's hands when having his hair brushed. Pure Vanilla cuddles as closely as he can, tucks his chin atop Shadow Milk's head every chance he gets. Pure Vanilla Cookie is ticklish on his neck, and makes cute little sounds when Shadow Milk places cold hands on his waist. Pure Vanilla Cookie is not above scolding him, but his eyes hold such overwhelming fondness in their quiet moments that Shadow Milk feels as if he could drown in their depths.

Which brings Shadow Milk back to problem number three.

Telling Pure Vanilla Cookie he's leaving.

There's no easy way to broach the topic of the Laboratorium, or why Shadow Milk feels compelled to go. While there haven't been any new wisps of Dark Moon Magic about recently, the impulsive decision to not ruin their first date has now left Shadow Milk with several weeks of silence on his conscience. He probably should have told Pure Vanilla about the first occurrence after the date, or sometime the next day, or at the very least that same week – but he hadn't.

Shadow Milk's innate knack for deception will never leave him entirely, it seems.

Unfortunately, there isn't really any reason to continue putting the topic off. Answers are what Shadow Milk needs, and his anxious mind won't rest without them. The importance of Pure Vanilla's safety overrides Shadow Milk's desire to keep whiling away his days in the other's company, no matter how soft and sweet those days have become. Shadow Milk has to go, has to be sure of what's going to happen – because something is going to happen.

They're going to fight about this.

Shadow Milk picks his own room as the stage for their conflict. They've had too many arguments in Pure Vanilla's own, and bringing the other here allows Shadow Milk to fill the area with the props he needs. It's a little strange to set a scene knowing full well Pure Vanilla is about to be upset with him, yet the reassurance of inevitability oddly helps center Shadow Milk as he works on repairing and preparing his room for Pure Vanilla's arrival. Discarding the wreckage scattered about is simple; fixing up the walls and ceiling, a bit more involved. Yet, by the time Shadow Milk's done, a perfectly suitable bedroom gleams back at him – styled to his taste in his own colors and finery, sure, but a decent-looking bedroom nonetheless. The curtains aren't drawn as tight, and the void on the ceiling is gone; though there's still some comfortable patches of darkness he'd left about in the corners for himself.

Nothing to do but gather dinner and wait.

Evening's long slipped into night by the time Pure Vanilla comes to the door; he heralds his arrival with a set of three knocks before turning the handle aside. When Pure Vanilla steps in, Shadow Milk straightens his back before dipping into a low bow.

“Your Majesty.”

A teasing pet name, but perhaps one that betrays his nerves. Shadow Milk watches with bated breath as Pure Vanilla lifts his staff, scanning over the newly refurbished room with a curious expression on his face. When his gaze lands on the table in the center, laid out to perfection with steaming dishes and sparkling glasses, Pure Vanilla's head tilts considerably to the side. There's a long pause, a moment of open contemplation before Pure Vanilla lifts his head up towards Shadow Milk.

“Do you have something you want to talk about?”

Shadow Milk fights back the urge to recoil, reflexively planting an innocent smile on his face instead. “What?”

Pure Vanilla smiles, gesturing to the table. “While I am gladdened to see you’ve made the room more comfortable for yourself, I cannot help but notice you’ve prepared all of my favorite dishes tonight.”

“So?” Shadow Milk retorts. “Can’t I do something nice?”

“You can,” Pure Vanilla replies freely, “and I am grateful for it. I very much enjoy Ham Croissandwiches. Along with...” Pure Vanilla’s gaze sweeps over the table. “Jelly Pot Pies, Crumbonara, Brie Wellington, Flancaccia, Fondough skewers with chocolate *and* cheese-”

“Alright, alright.” Shadow Milk scowls to himself, folding his arms across his chest. “Fine. Maybe I went overboard. Is that a crime?”

“Of course not.” Pure Vanilla is crossing the room, pulling out his chair from the table. “It is only familiar.” His smile deepens as he glances up to Shadow Milk again. “Hollyberry Cookie would always make me my favorites whenever she had something difficult to talk about.”

“I am not Hollyberry Cookie,” Shadow Milk mutters, gliding over to take his own seat. “Thank you very much.”

“No, you are not.” Pure Vanilla Cookie’s settling in, resting his staff against the back of his chair before returning his attention to Shadow Milk. “But I do feel compelled to ask – do you have anything in particular you wish to talk about?”

“Later.” Shadow Milk flicks his wrist as the serving spoons float to life, moving from dish to dish as they begin piling food onto the plates. “Let’s just eat first.”

It’s not like their dinner passes in silence; there’s still plenty to discuss from their day-to-day, even between mouthfuls of food. They drift between topics easily, bantering back and forth about everything from the recent mayoral election to which noodle shape for pasta reigns supreme. The conversation flows like water; it’s not until most of the dishes have been emptied and Shadow Milk’s teleported the rest off to the kitchens that he registers that Pure Vanilla’s gone and sat down on the bed.

An invitation, plain as day, for the deeper discussion that hangs in the air. Perhaps it will go better with their bellies full of good food. That’d been the plan, anyway.

Shadow Milk’s not so sure of it now.

Still, he takes the bait, floating over to settle beside Pure Vanilla on the sheets. Both of their legs dangle over the edge; while they’re not pressed together, there’s barely an inch of space between them as their hands brush delicately against one another. Pure Vanilla’s gaze is on the floor, an idle sort of contentment on his face as he waits, openly, for Shadow Milk to be the one to start the conversation.

This part, at least, Shadow Milk's prepared for.

"I need to go talk to them."

It had felt like the easiest starting point; there's no question as to the *who*, only recognition gleaned from the way Pure Vanilla's eyes slowly close in acknowledgement. A beat of silence, before Pure Vanilla softly asks:

"Is that safe?"

The first, and most important thing to him.

A lie here is pointless. They both know it.

"I don't know," Shadow Milk replies; it's the truth, if only barely. "But I have no intention of playing recklessly."

"Where do you intend to go?"

Shadow Milk shifts uncomfortably on the bed. "There's a... laboratory on the coast of Beast Yeast. It's where our bodies were made. It's the last place I saw them."

Pure Vanilla's eyes crack open, a heavy fatigue in his lowered gaze. "Where Dark Enchantress Cookie resides as well."

"Yes," Shadow Milk affirms.

"Why do you feel you have to go?" Pure Vanilla's keeping his eyes on the floor. "What are you looking for?"

"Answers," Shadow Milk replies after a moment. "I need to know why Silent Salt's archer was there in the markets. Why there's been no scouts or follow-up. Why..." Shadow Milk hesitates, bracing himself. "Why I keep finding traces of Dark Moon Magic around the castle."

A heavy silence settles over the room; Shadow Milk is trying not to look at Pure Vanilla, squaring his shoulders against the inevitable scolding.

"You've felt them too?"

Shadow Milk's gaze snaps up in an instant, eyes wide; Pure Vanilla's looking back with a tired smile, a flicker of amusement in his eyes to match Shadow Milk's dumbfounded expression. "What?" Shadow Milk sputters. "You mean, you-?"

"Of course," Pure Vanilla replies with a soft chuckle. "You aren't the only mage who lives here, Shadow Milk Cookie. I am sensitive to magical currents as well." Pure Vanilla nods his head towards the floorboards. "Though admittedly, I first thought it was only the protection runes you've been etching all over the place."

Oops.

Shadow Milk fights down his flush. “If you noticed, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I hoped it would set your mind at ease.” Pure Vanilla’s hand shifts over, gently covering Shadow Milk’s own. “I know you are only trying to protect me. Considering you were the one who was harmed on my behalf, I had no intention of refusing a show of caution. Though I wish you’d told me the magic wasn’t your own sooner. You don’t have to hide such things from me, you know.”

“I know. And I’m not sure whose magic it is. Which is why I have to find out.” It’s strange how instinctive it’s become to hold Pure Vanilla’s hand in his own, even if Shadow Milk still has to look away again. “Silent Salt doesn’t use Dark Moon Magic, at least as far back as I can recall. If that’s changed, I want to know, along with any future plans for the Vanilla Kingdom. The Laboratorium is my best chance of finding out.”

“Perhaps this is foolish of me to ask after so long,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment. “But could you not reach out to Silent Salt another way? Some spell, or even simply... a letter?”

“There’s a spell,” Shadow Milk replies easily, “but it’s not one to be used lightly. And I think it’d do more harm than good.”

Pure Vanilla cocks his head. “Why?”

Shadow Milk sighs in reply before continuing: “Because I wouldn’t just be contacting Silent Salt. It would summon the gaze of all the Beasts, at once – an agreement made upon crafting the spell and weaving it around ourselves in the first place. No secret side conversations, no room to manipulate them separately – if we are to speak, it is as a group.”

“And you don’t want that?” Pure Vanilla asks gently. “You said you wanted to speak with them. They are still your friends, are they not?”

A complicated can of worms Shadow Milk doesn’t feel like opening tonight.

“It could be that only Silent Salt’s eyes are upon the Vanilla Kingdom,” Shadow Milk says instead. “I don’t want to draw unnecessary attention from all of them at once, much less alert them to any... squabbling. If no one else is involved, it’s better not to have sides be drawn.”

Especially considering Shadow Milk hardly thinks his side will be the one taken.

Silence stretches across the room once more; Pure Vanilla is thinking, and Shadow Milk simply waits that out. His own mind is already made up, even if he knows what the next words out of Pure Vanilla’s mouth will be.

“I don’t want you to go.” Gentle and saddened, accompanied by a soft squeeze of Pure Vanilla’s hand. “You’ve already been hurt trying to protect me once. I don’t want you to risk this again. You’re still wounded, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“I know,” Shadow Milk replies simply. “And I know it would have been easier to simply go and return without telling you.”

“It might have been,” Pure Vanilla says softly. “But still, you told me.”

“Yes.” An easy shrug. “You would have found out eventually. Might as well get the scolding over with now.”

“I’m not going to scold you.” Pure Vanilla’s hand comes up, cupping Shadow Milk’s cheek; Shadow Milk allows his head to be turned, reluctantly meeting Pure Vanilla’s heavy gaze. “I know your intentions are good. I know why you feel you have to do this. But there has to be another way.”

“Your kingdom’s in danger, Pure Vanilla Cookie.” A low blow, but one Shadow Milk’s had ready from the start. “Dark Enchantress Cookie has already stolen your people away from you once. Whoever sits at the heart of this plot against you, the answer needs to be found before another strike, not after.”

A long sigh as Pure Vanilla leans forward, resting his head against Shadow Milk’s. “That does not mean that this path is the answer. It’s dangerous, Shadow Milk Cookie. I know you are powerful, but-”

“You worry about me?”

Pure Vanilla nods, the motion rubbing gently against Shadow Milk’s forehead.

Shadow Milk pushes lightly back, a soft nuzzle before he continues: “I can do this. Only I can do this. The Beast of Deceit is still a part of me. He can handle whatever those foolish little gnats throw at him.” A smile. “I’m looking for the truth, all to protect your people. I’m hitting all your buzzwords. How can you refuse me, hm?”

This at least draws a huffed laugh from Pure Vanilla; his hand glides gently over Shadow Milk’s cheek before coming to rest on the curve of his jaw. “Please don’t go.”

“I’m going to,” Shadow Milk affirms. “But I’ll come back safe.”

A sigh, soft and sad. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can.” Shadow Milk tilts his head, pressing a kiss to Pure Vanilla’s cheek. “I’ll come back better than ever, without a single scratch on me.”

Pure Vanilla shakes his head, even as a smile twitches at the corner of his lips. “You big liar.”

“It’s not a lie if I make it true.”

Another chuckle as Pure Vanilla scoots closer; Shadow Milk leans in, allowing his arms to wrap around Pure Vanilla’s chest as the other mimics the motion. Distantly, Shadow Milk recalls the time after their second date, when Pure Vanilla had accidentally pinned Shadow Milk’s arms to his side in the hug. Pure Vanilla had picked up on his tension immediately, had released his grasp – he’d noticed. He’d adjusted.

It had been small. But it matters, even now.

Shadow Milk has to do this.

It's not entirely clear which of them leads the other down onto the bed; really, it hardly matters. Shadow Milk is too wrapped up in Pure Vanilla's warmth to even begin to care. The gentle scent of vanilla sinks into his dough as Shadow Milk buries himself closer; the arms around him tighten, as if refusing to let him go. A sigh that echoes from them in tandem as they shift into a hold that is second nature by now, with Shadow Milk's face pressed into Pure Vanilla's neck.

He can feel Pure Vanilla's pulse like this; what is so often strong and steady is now quickened and fluttered.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is scared.

"I'll be okay," Shadow Milk promises into the silence. Pure Vanilla grips him tighter, but says nothing. "Really," Shadow Milk continues placatingly, "I'm a good actor, Nilly. Capable of tricking the best. I'll be in and out before you even notice I'm gone. You've got nothing to worry about."

"I am worried," Pure Vanilla replies softly, "that Dark Enchantress Cookie will once again take away someone I care about."

Shadow Milk's Soul Jam thrums with affection as he squeezes Pure Vanilla in his grasp. "She won't. Honestly, she probably won't even be home. Might just leave if she sees me coming, let me and Silent Salt hash it out by ourselves."

Pure Vanilla's hand has come up, resting at the top of Shadow Milk's head before running slowly down through his hair. "I'd like to be able to believe you."

"You don't have to," Shadow Milk replies simply. "Just trust me."

Another sigh, low and soft – ringing with exhaustion that echoes in Shadow Milk's jam. "I do trust you. I trust you to look after me, but I worry about you looking after yourself."

"Hey, feeling's mutual, bub." Shadow Milk gives Pure Vanilla a little nudge; surprisingly, this draws another huffed laugh from the other. "When I'm gone, I'll need you to be extra careful. Stick with Black Raisin Cookie, or at least try to keep to your room. And definitely no trips to the markets, got it?"

Pure Vanilla's hand comes to rest on the nape of Shadow Milk's neck. "May I ask something of you in return, then?"

Shadow Milk's heart thuds loudly in his chest; the *anything* that threatens to spill from his lips feels like too much, so he casually replies: "Maybe."

"May I stay here tonight?"

The words take a moment to register in Shadow Milk's mind, far longer than it takes his mouth to numbly parrot: "Here? Tonight?"

"Yes." Pure Vanilla's voice is soft, breath tickling the side of Shadow Milk's head. "If that's alright."

Of course it's alright. It's more than alright, a thousand times better than how Shadow Milk had expected this conversation to go. They haven't shared a bed since the healing bay; while Shadow Milk's own bed doesn't hold a candle to the plush luxury of Pure Vanilla's own, that barely matters against the promise of once again falling asleep in the other's arms.

Shadow Milk doesn't voice any of this; all he can rasp out is a hoarse: "Sure."

Pure Vanilla hums against his dough and Shadow Milk has to fight back a shiver at the sensation.

They scoot under the sheets; it takes longer than it should, both being unwilling to release their grasp on the other, but eventually they're settling down against the pillows in a comfortable embrace. It takes little more than a slight flex of Shadow Milk's wrist for the lights to slowly dim and the curtains to part, allowing in the gentle light of a crescent moon. Pure Vanilla sighs into the quiet before pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Shadow Milk's forehead. When he pulls back, a soft murmur lingers in his wake.

"Please come back to me."

Shadow Milk swallows; he presses closer, exhaling his own stuttered sigh into Pure Vanilla's neck.

"I will. I promise."

He has to. Even if it's in pieces, even if he's reduced to little more than crumbs crawling over the threshold – Shadow Milk has to come back.

There's nowhere else his heart could lead but here.

Chapter 29

The thing about the Laboratorium is there's no grandeur to the place.

Shadow Milk would like to be able to say he's staring up at an intimidating castle, towering threateningly over a land brought to its knees. It feels as if there should be some sort of menacing structure looming over him, something that personifies the decay and rot that throbs at the heart of this little operation - at the very least, something Shadow Milk can stand before in defiance as he prepares to slip back into its unforgiving maw. Unfortunately, the base remains as firmly underground as before, and all Shadow Milk has to silhouette himself against is an ugly sewer drainpipe and some withered old roots jutting from the cliffside.

The once-vibrant Island of Life definitely isn't looking the part nowadays.

There's certainly been... progress, since the last time Shadow Milk had visited. The small tufts of green that had stood defiantly atop the cliffside are now crumbled to ash; the flowering trees now sway as little more than brittle husks in the wind. The scent of smoke and acrid chemicals wafts along the seashore, its waters polluted with grime as the waves crash against sludge-covered rocks. Even the air is tainted a sickly green, as if the wind itself is permeated by a permanent foulness.

Such a grim, ugly place. Shadow Milk had been delighted by it, once.

Part of him still is. The Beast of Deceit prowls restlessly inside his chest, eagerly snapping its jaws in anticipation. It's ready to play, itching to shove this new Shadow Milk Cookie aside and slip into place where it belongs. He's going to let it, too - because here, this is who he'll need to be. The Beast of Deceit knows its lines by heart, knows exactly how to menace and get its way.

Shadow Milk just has to let it in.

He takes a bit to steel himself, first. A few extra minutes of floating around outside while he thinks won't cost him anything.

Probably.

It's not like Shadow Milk had been in a hurry to get here in the first place. He'd made up his mind ages ago, certainly - but had dragged his feet far more than he should have, even knowing this was his choice alone. Pure Vanilla himself certainly hadn't made the morning of Shadow Milk's departure easy.

Leaving the safety and comfort of Pure Vanilla's arms is a form of torture in and of itself. Every inch of Shadow Milk's dough had resisted the very notion of parting from him again, had made the effort of sliding out of Pure Vanilla's grasp far more grueling than it had any right to be. Worse, the motion had roused the other - where Shadow Milk had hoped for a quiet exit, he'd instead received Pure Vanilla's eyes slowly blinking to wakefulness. There'd been a groan, a groggy stare before recognition had flickered into focus.

Followed, heart-wrenchingly, by a soft, sad frown.

So much for an easy escape.

They'd talked for a bit; Pure Vanilla had coaxed a reluctant Shadow Milk back to the edge of the bed, led him back down into his arms. Pure Vanilla had held him tight as Shadow Milk - like always - had lacked the strength to refuse him, but still quietly insisted on the necessity of his departure. It's not like Pure Vanilla had forbidden him to go, or even tried pleading with him to stay again. Shadow Milk's insistence was ironclad, voice firm even as he'd pressed another kiss to Pure Vanilla's cheek to comfort.

Worry had been etched into every line of Pure Vanilla's expression, and Shadow Milk couldn't blame him. Shadow Milk was worried too.

More assurances had been needed, empty as they were. Gentle touches, murmured promises laced with the lie of certainty. Perhaps a few more minutes entangled with the other had been something Shadow Milk had needed too, because by the time he was ready to pull away his resolve had only been strengthened. His course was set, immovable, drunk on the warmth and scent of the very essence he sought to protect.

Pure Vanilla had tried to kiss him.

The fact Shadow Milk had refused dumbfounds him even now, makes him grit his teeth and sigh into the empty air. So stupid – and for what? Pure Vanilla had been so openly pained and scared; all he'd wanted was one last hint of reassurance. One last embrace in case the worst happened, to remove any lingering regrets. It's not like Shadow Milk doesn't *want* Pure Vanilla to kiss him again – he does, very much so. It should be a simple thing to kiss him back.

It isn't.

He'd turned aside, letting Pure Vanilla's kiss graze his cheek; when the other's questioning gaze caught his own, Shadow Milk had murmured back a *not yet* that grates on his dough just to recall. Pure Vanilla had been afraid. Shadow Milk should have just given in, consoled him how Pure Vanilla wanted. It just – hadn't felt right. If they're going to kiss again, it should be for a good reason. Not fear. Not desperately covering their bases before parting. Shadow Milk wants Pure Vanilla to make that choice, to take that step again with nothing pulling him one way or the other.

Gods. He's so dramatic. Can't have anything unless it's perfect. Idiot. Pure Vanilla will probably never try to kiss him again after that.

The Beast of Deceit snaps its jaws in agreement.

With another sigh, Shadow Milk's shoulders drop as he shakes out his limbs. Right. Enough stalling, enough pretending he's psyching himself up. He just needs to get in, get what he needs, and get out. Quick and simple. He can handle that. The Beast of Deceit can handle that. They won't dare refuse it.

There's still time to turn around. Time to run back into the Vanilla Kingdom, to slip back into the safety of his bed and kiss Pure Vanilla Cookie just as fiercely as he's aching for it.

Shadow Milk doesn't do that. Instead, his eyes slip shut; he lets out a long exhale and sets his sense of self adrift as a familiar chill curls in his chest. His hands clench, his mouth twists cruelly – when Shadow Milk's eyes snap open once more, they are sharp and dangerous.

The Beast of Deceit wears his face, baring its teeth in a wicked grin.

Time to put on a show.

--

The passageways through the Laboratory are encrusted in filth; sludge and grime are packed through every pipe that Shadow Milk follows around twisting turns and bends. The shadows are his best friend, a way to nimbly avoid the decrepit decay that's coated along every wall. Crawling his way through the black and slipping through a crack in the vents deposits Shadow Milk into a large, empty hallway; he reforms in an instant, cold eyes scanning his surroundings with open displeasure.

He's not familiar with the location; it's just another length of passageway reinforced by the same sleek metal turned eerie green beneath flickering, florescent lights. The Laboratory is far more of a maze than Shadow Milk remembers – granted, he'd spent much of his time floating about in the main laboratory, but it seems as if they've expanded the base in his absence. It matters little either way; while his goal remains the Beast Wing, all Shadow Milk needs to do is find one hapless researcher to wring the answers out of.

In the distance, there's an echoing sound of footsteps approaching – the revelation makes Shadow Milk grin with delight. So thoughtful! Delivering themselves straight to him.

Shadow Milk folds his arms behind his back and waits; in only a few moments, two Cookies round the corner of the hallway. Both seem to be lab assistants by the looks of things; they're wearing spotless white coats and thin paper masks across their mouths, along with oven mitts on their hands and thick rubber boots. They're both presently distracted, chattering away about the cafeteria's lackluster lunch options while Shadow Milk hovers patiently down the hall.

When they're only a few feet away, the woman on the right finally spots him; she freezes mid-step, before abruptly turning on her heels as if to run. Shadow Milk immediately flicks his cane, slamming her into the wall before thick ropes of sludge whip upwards to hold her in place, covering her mouth as she tries to scream. The man on the left gasps; his clipboard drops from his hands, clattering loudly on the floor as Shadow Milk lunges through the air to bear down on him with a wicked grin.

“Well, well, well!” Shadow Milk sing-songs, tapping his cane in the palm of his hand. “What’s this? Two new toys for me to play with? And look!” He points to the woman. “This one’s already wrapped! So thoughtful, I’m touched!”

“You’re-” the man gasps, stumbling backwards as Shadow Milk floats ever closer. “You’re one of- one of the Beast-”

“Beast Cookies? But of course!” Shadow Milk flicks his wrist left; the man is thrown upwards, pinned to the ceiling in an instant. He struggles, bound by an invisible force as Shadow Milk lazily flips over in the air to meet the man’s eyes. “What, no welcome home party? Come on! It was your oh-so skilled hands that made my body in the first place!”

“I-” the man stutters, “w-worked on... c-c-clean-up...”

“Ugh. Boring.” Shadow Milk gives the man a once-over before remarking: “Let’s liven you up a bit, shall we?” A quick tap of his cane to the man’s face and the lab coat is gone in an instant, replaced by a navy-blue clown suit and framed by gaudy white makeup smeared across the man’s face. “There! Now, isn’t that *so* much more *fun*?”

The man stares back at him, face suddenly twisting into a warped smile. He laughs – then laughs and laughs, body shaking as peals of giggles are torn from him without end. Shadow Milk floats backwards, observing the other with a satisfied smile before glancing down to the woman.

She stares up, wide-eyed and horrified.

Good.

Shadow Milk floats back down to her, leaning in with a curious look. “Did *you* work on clean-up?”

She rapidly shakes her head, even with the sludge restricting her movements; Shadow Milk smiles back. “Oh, good!” he remarks. “So tell me - do you happen to know where the Beast Wing is? It’s *ever* so important that I find it.”

The woman nods again, eyes wide and unblinking. Shadow Milk taps his cane in his palm; the sludge covering her mouth drops to the floor as she slumps forward, taking in heaving gasps of breath. Shadow Milk semi-patiently waits her out before snapping: “Well?”

“T-third floor,” she stammers weakly. “S-stairs... two halls d-down... on the right...”

“Ooo, thank you kindly!” Shadow Milk claps his hands together in glee. “Oh, I just can’t wait to see all my old friends again! They *are* here, aren’t they?”

The woman’s expression screws up in confusion. “All? N-no, I’m sorry, there’s... there’s only one Beast here...”

Silent Salt, no doubt. Perfect. He won’t have to face them all at once.

“Now then!” Shadow Milk twirls his cane with an elegant flourish, sizing her up. “You’ve been so, so, so helpful, my dear! What should your reward be, hm?” He cocks his head, considering her. “Ooh! Have you ever wanted to be a *dancer*?”

“No-”

“Here’s your chance!” Shadow Milk strikes the air; in an instant, the sludge binding her drops and the woman’s labcoat is transformed into an elegant suit. She squawks in alarm as her body begins moving, shaking and swaying in rhythmic twirls as she glides across the floor.

“Wait-” she gasps. “Wait, wait-!”

“Have fun!” Shadow Milk calls, already zipping away overhead with a wicked grin. The sound of her stumbling footsteps and the man’s hideous laughter echo ominously as Shadow Milk flies down the corridor. It’s not his finest work, could have used more audience participation, but the Beast is satisfied with the display he’s left behind. Shadow Milk may be here to find answers, but he’s not leaving without proving a point.

The Beast of Deceit is not here to play nice.

--

Shadow Milk slips back into the shadows once he nears the stairs; there’s a cacophony of voices growing louder as he slinks up the walls, nimbly avoiding more researchers heading down. Once he’s reached the door to the third floor, Shadow Milk takes a moment to pause and look it over – while it’s not completely surprising to see, there is quite a large lock in place around the door’s handle. What’s more, all the researchers descending down the stairs seem to pass by the door to the third floor with hurried footsteps before resuming their more leisurely pace.

This must be the place.

Slipping through the crack in the door, Shadow Milk is greeted by the sound of the voices growing louder; as soon as he’s on the other side, his eyes refocus to find a gathering of Cookies crowding about in the hallway. Their voices are raised, not shouting, but teetering on the cusp as they scowl and bicker with one another. Surprisingly, they lack the garb the researchers had worn; in fact, none of them look like scientists at all. They look like-

“Hey!” A gravelly voice, lips sneered in discontent as hooves stomp on the floor. “When are the new rooms going to be ready? We’ve been waiting for hours!”

Wild Spice Cookies.

“Oh, please.” A sweet, high-pitched voice, laced with a lazy yawn and accompanied by the flutter of wings. “What’s the rush? Relax.”

Eternal Sugar's Cherubim.

"The rush," the first snaps, pointing behind himself, "is I don't want to keep hanging around these creeps any longer than I have to! Or you little pests, for that matter!"

Shadow Milk's gaze blankly follows the man's gesture, head robotically turning towards-

Silent Salt's constructs – with a bevy of oh-so familiar archers.

All three camps of Cookies haven't noticed him, something Shadow Milk's grateful for as he instinctively melds back into the shadows. Each seem to be arguing with the other – or rather, the first two are, as the constructs remain motionless and packed in tight military formation. This... eclectic array are simply standing around in the hall, but there's quite a lot of them, far too many to be simple leftovers or wanderers in search of their masters.

Nothing good can come of this.

Shadow Milk glides along the shadows overhead, listening closely – but there's nothing of value being said. The Wild Spice Cookies are muttering impatiently and complaining about the Cherubim; the Cherubim are sweetly mocking them from above and flattering each other in the same breath. The constructs do, well, nothing, standing at the ready for orders that have clearly yet to be given.

The Beasts are amassing an army – or so it would seem, at least. Yet, the researchers he'd captured had said there was only *one* Beast in these halls, not the three whose minions now crowd the corridor.

So what's going on?

Shadow Milk continues past the gathering, drifting from shadow to shadow as he passes more and more minions milling about. It's not until he's turned several corners that the presence of other Cookies thins out completely, leaving the clamoring from before to fade out into little more than a far-away murmur. No one's about this far in - as if they're giving this area in particular an exceptionally wide berth.

There's not much guesswork to be done as to the why.

Another few moments of drifting allows Shadow Milk to turn the final corner; and there, at the end of the halls, he can spot a massive door towering above all else. It almost looks as if it's a repurposed vault, sealed tight by several layers of chains and locks. On first glance, Shadow Milk might mistake it for a treasury, or perhaps a high-security lab sealed off from the world.

The scattering of milky-white flour leaking through the sill dispels all other notions.

The question of who is here is no longer relevant; the *why* still hangs in the air, dangerous and potent. Still, Shadow Milk's found an avenue to question – even if it's far from his preferred one.

Shadow Milk dissipates back into the shadows, winding his way through the mechanisms of the massive locks; it takes some doing, but it's not terribly long before he's finally slipping out into the other side. He reassembles his form – yet the instant his eyes snap back into place, he's assaulted by a sea of blinding white, the feeling of breath choking upon the thick miasma permeating the air. Shadow Milk hacks loudly, hands wildly grasping up at his head as he instinctively throws a barrier charm around himself. He surrounds himself in a thin blue bubble, encasing himself in full before more fog can assault him. It takes a few more moments of hacking and coughing, but Shadow Milk's eyes finally clear enough to let him hazily blink his surroundings into view.

He's in a massive, towering room – yet for its sheer size, it can barely contain the presence that sits calmly at its center. Her eyes are closed, hands folded serenely in her lap; if she has taken notice of his presence, she does not show it. Shadow Milk blearily wipes at his face, shaking off the flour coating him with an irritable huff and whisking it away with a flick of his cane.

“Sheesh! Mind turning down the fog machine, Misty?”

If Mystic Flour Cookie has heard him, she does not acknowledge it. The slow rise and fall of her chest is the only thing that betrays her still-living state; she is the very picture of placid serenity, undisturbed and untouchable.

Shadow Milk pokes her.

“Hey.”

Mystic Flour Cookie's expression is unchanged; yet slowly, gradually, her dull eyes crack open. She regards him for a moment – Shadow Milk grins back, fluttering his lashes impishly. “Hey, Misty! Long time no see. How about a hug, hm?”

A beat of silence follows as Mystic Flour passively observes him. She says nothing for a long moment – before her eyes slowly slip shut again.

“Oh, come on,” Shadow Milk complains. He pokes her cheek again, to no effect. “Wake up and play with me! What are you doing in here, cooped up all by yourself? Don't tell me regular old locks are keeping *you* in.”

Mystic Flour's eyes do not open, but the miasma coating the room thickens, obscuring more of Shadow Milk's limited vision. He's about to try and sweep it all away with his magic when there's a sudden, soft:

“Leave this place, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

Ah. Now they're getting somewhere.

“Leave? So soon? Not very welcoming, are we?” Shadow Milk flips over in the air, grinning ear to ear – for naught, as she's still refusing to open her eyes. “Ugh, come on, Misty. You know I'm not going to leave you alone *that* easily.”

“Your persistence,” Mystic Flour replies quietly, “is futile. Do not disturb my meditation.”

“Sorry! Have a couple questions to run through, if you don’t mind. I’ll skedaddle right after. I know how *cranky* you get about your naps.” Shadow Milk pokes her cheek one final time; this, at least, draws her cold gaze once more. “So tell me – how come you’re hiding away in here, Flour Power?”

“I,” Mystic Flour says after a moment, “wish to remain undisturbed.”

“Don’t you have a temple and all that for your hideaway times?”

“My location is meaningless.” Mystic Flour’s eyes slip shut once more. “So long as I am alone.”

Ugh. Well, a door that big would keep the pesky Ancients out, wouldn’t it?

“What’s with all the minions out and about?” Shadow Milk gestures, albeit pointlessly, over his shoulder. “Seriously, it’s like our own personal circus. Not that I’m complaining.”

Silence. She’s ignoring him again.

“Hey.” Shadow Milk circles around her, poking and prodding at her hair. “Come on, Misty. I didn’t come all this way for nothing.”

“Your questions are purposeless.” Mystic Flour’s tone is so placid, yet still so cold. “Our aid was demanded by our ally; the others have provided as asked. You have been excluded from such trivial matters in pursuit of your own schemes.”

Our ally? Only one Cookie fits that bill – and she’s an answer Shadow Milk has been dreading.

Dark Enchantress Cookie.

“Our aid?” Shadow Milk swerves in the air, tone accusing. “What sort of *aid* are we talking about?”

Mystic Flour Cookie remains silent.

Great.

Still, it’s not hard to put two and two together. The groups of Cookies assembled in the hall, haphazard as they are, are comprised exclusively of the servants of the Beasts. If Dark Enchantress Cookie holds the reins over them, then she’s mustering an army – or at the very least, bolstering her own forces. A dire omen at best, and more than likely an imminent threat if Shadow Milk’s instincts are right.

The Vanilla Kingdom is in more danger than he’d thought.

“Mystic Flour Cookie.” Shadow Milk’s paused in his circling, hovering before her; his tone is serious, enough to even draw her half-lidded gaze once more. “Tell me. What’s going on?”

She regards him for a few moments; her expression is implacable, unyielding in its stiff appraisal. Suddenly, her eyes drop to Shadow Milk's shoulder – there's a sudden piercingness to her gaze, in how sharply the slits of her eyes narrow in on his dough.

“You are injured.”

It's remarkable how simply she states it, as if observing nothing more than a passing breeze. Shadow Milk's hand instinctively moves up to cover himself – before a small, wry smile twists on his lips. “Aw! How kind of you to notice! You can thank Silent Salt's little minions for that one – a nice, pointy arrow, right through my shoulder. Delightfully poisonous too; I simply *haven't* been the same!”

Mystic Flour looks him over again; when she says nothing, Shadow Milk continues with: “What, going soft on me? Don't think I don't know what's going on in that big ol' forehead of yours.” Shadow Milk's eyes narrow. “It's funny, actually. I used to run to you all the time whenever I got hurt. Remember that?”

Silence follows; but Mystic Flour has not closed her eyes yet. She's watching him, far too carefully for Shadow Milk's liking.

“Every cut and scrape. Every bruise from stumbling over books. You'd pat my head and call me clumsy. As if it was easy getting around in those stuffy, oversized robes.” Shadow Milk massages his shoulder unconsciously, forcing himself to hold her gaze. “But we both know what kind of *healing* you offer now.”

“What I offer,” Mystic Flour replies softly, “is a release from all pain. The absence of any conflict or strife. You, whose soul has ever been weighed by your burdens, should see the wisdom of my gift and embrace it.”

“Pass.” Shadow Milk's hand drops from his shoulder, hanging limply at his side. “What's the point of pointlessness, Misty? If it's all going to end - what's the rush? Might as well enjoy myself before oblivion.”

“A futile endeavor. Your pursuits are hollow.” Mystic Flour Cookie blinks slowly. “What a pitiable existence. My blessing would free you, yet you choose to deceive yourself into believing your desires have meaning. You persist in everlasting pain for the false hope of tomorrow.”

“Well,” Shadow Milk drawls, “deceit is sorta my whole shtick. Did you expect anything else?”

“I expect nothing of you.” Mystic Flour's eyes close, a finality in her dismissal. “We chose our own paths long ago. All will return to flour. You delay only the inevitable.”

“Gosh, it's always *so* much fun talking to you. We *really* have to do this more often.” Shadow Milk floats backwards, folding his arms across his chest. “But, before I take my leave of your quaint little abode, I want my question answered – what's going on? Why does Dark Enchantress Cookie want your – *their* aid? Why are Silent Salt's archers being ordered into *my* domain, without my knowledge?”

“You seek enlightenment, yet ask for water from a stone.” Mystic Flour Cookie’s hand slowly lifts, placing itself against her chest. “The one you seek resides within these walls. Face her, if you must continue down this empty course. It all leads to the same end.”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Oh, so helpful! Forgive me for thinking you might actually be worth speaking to.” He turns on his heels, forcing back a sigh as he heads towards the door.

A stone is right. Unbending. Unwilling. Uncaring for him, or any other.

“Shadow Milk Cookie.”

A sudden crispness to her voice makes Shadow Milk pause; when he glances back, Mystic Flour’s eyes are still closed. Yet, there’s a sudden shift in the air, an ominous feeling that brushes at the back of Shadow Milk’s neck as he stares her down.

Mystic Flour’s lips do not move, yet her voice rings clearly in Shadow Milk’s mind.

You cannot resist the will of your creator.

Shadow Milk’s mouth snaps open in hot retort – yet something in her wording makes him pause. The uneasy feeling in the air persists, accompanied by the ever-thickening presence of the fog pressing in all around. Mystic Flour Cookie’s hand lowers, folding back in her lap as she bows her head.

There’s a question that lingers on Shadow Milk’s tongue – yet instinctively, he knows it will not be answered. He merely gives Mystic Flour Cookie a final once-over before turning away and offering a simple: “Goodbye, Mystic Flour Cookie.”

Then he’s slipping out the door, melding back into the shadows with only silence left in his wake.

Reforming on the other side of the door would normally come with a sigh of relief; at minimum, Shadow Milk can now dispel his charm, allow himself some fresh air and dust the last remnants of flour from his coat. Yet Mystic Flour’s words turn in his head over and over as Shadow Milk floats in place, ruminating with a deepening frown. There’s a – possibility that’s trickling into his mind, and it’s not one he likes. It’s a vague idea, nebulous at best; yet still, an uneasy feeling is creeping down Shadow Milk’s back.

Regardless, Shadow Milk is wasting time. He’s been here too long already, and yet he only has half of an answer and a vague warning at best. Silent Salt isn’t here but the constructs are – and serving at another’s hand. As unenviable as the situation is, as much as Shadow Milk has tried to resist the inevitable, there’s only one Cookie who can tell him everything he needs to know.

Outplaying Dark Enchantress Cookie is a dangerous game - but it’s the only option Shadow Milk has left.

There is, at least, some amusement in darkening the hallways as Shadow Milk approaches, in snuffing out every scrap of light as he glides back towards the crowd. Their growing shouts

of confusion and alarm ring through the sleek metal corridors as Shadow Milk slides through the shadows, reveling in their disorientation and blind panic as he hovers just out of sight. The Wild Spice Cookies are stampeding every which way; the Cherubim keep colliding into each other in mid-air.

The Silent Salt constructs do nothing, but that's to be expected.

Shadow Milk heralds his arrival with thunderous applause of his own making; the shockwave reverberates through the metal, sending half the crowd to their knees. As Shadow Milk reforms overhead, the shouts of anger are immediately stifled into a hushed murmur. All eyes are upon him, the sheer sight of him causing Cookies to step back and shrink in on themselves. There's an uneasy silence settling in as Shadow Milk casts his lazy gaze over the crowd – picking out the weakest member of the herd.

There.

A large, muscular fellow with twin horns is Shadow Milk's target of choice; he reappears before the Cookie in an instant, causing a quick back-step in alarm as the crowd murmurs in shock. Shadow Milk makes a point to look the man over, before offering a sharp, pointed grin.

"Tell me," Shadow Milk remarks easily, "what's your name, little fella?"

There's an open flash of anger, rage flaring in the Cookie's eyes – before Shadow Milk's own gaze sharpens, instantly making the other shrink in on himself. "Saffron... Buffalo Cookie."

"Well then!" Shadow Milk claps his hands; the sound makes the crowd flinch as one. "Saffron Buffoon Cookie. Perhaps you can help me, with a teensy, tiny little favor?"

Shadow Milk leans in close, offering a smile that is all teeth.

"Take me to Dark Enchantress Cookie."

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Out of all of Dark Enchantress Cookie's many lacking attributes, style is not one of them.

The Laboratory is a bore, sure – but the personal quarters that Saffron Buffalo Cookie escorts him to on trembling hooves is anything but bleak. Pushing open opulent peppermint-striped doors reveals a luxurious sitting room, completely at odds with the sterile environment of the lab just outside. Plush lounge chairs, glass coffee tables, even a crackling fireplace all greet Shadow Milk with an eerie sort of charm that's only accentuated by the flickering shadows cast across the room. The furnishings are all painted a delightful shade of wine red and accentuated by sharp whites and crimsons that tie the room together quite nicely.

It's quite fashionable for an evil lair, and Shadow Milk would know. He'd had one of the best.

Before the fireplace stands Dark Enchantress Cookie, her back to the door. Her head inclines slightly upon his entry, the briefest of glances over her shoulder - he's rather impossible to ignore with how loudly Saffron Buffalo's hooves clatter in quick retreat. Yet it isn't until Shadow Milk pointedly kicks the door shut with a slam that Dark Enchantress Cookie finally turns towards him, her ghastly silhouette elongating in the firelight. The skull atop her staff gleams malevolently and the tips of her horns sway as Dark Enchantress Cookie slowly tilts her head. The Bringer of Calamity, the Herald of the Dark Flour War stares him down, dark eyes sharpening as she takes him in.

She's holding a wine glass.

She's smiling.

"Ah. Shadow Milk Cookie." Dark Enchantress Cookie's tone is pleasant, even if her smile is anything but. "I've been expecting you."

Right. They're getting straight to it, then.

"Dark Enchantress Cookie," Shadow Milk replies, equally pleasant. His hands lace politely behind his back as he floats closer; atop the closest counter, he spies a vintage bottle of berry juice lain out. He perks a brow, then motions towards it. "Relaxing after a long day, are we?"

"Simply enjoying myself." Dark Enchantress Cookie's gaze doesn't leave him for a moment. "I've been so terribly busy of late. And how about you, my dear Shadow Milk Cookie?" Her eyes flash wickedly. "How are you... feeling?"

"Oh, thank you so much for asking," Shadow Milk simpers back. "I'm quite well, aside from this tiny little *prick* in my shoulder." Shadow Milk's own eyes glint dangerously; the room shudders with his discontent, rattling the bottle across the counter. "Tell me," Shadow Milk continues coolly, "Does that ring any bells?"

"Ah, yes." Dark Enchantress Cookie raises her glass, swirling it as she watches him. "I must say, you surprised me, my dear. There I was, thinking we'd given you a golden opportunity to retrieve the Soul Jam - only to have you *snuff it out* by your own hand." Dark Enchantress Cookie's palm tightens around her glass; the fire in the hearth surges briefly, a loud *snap* echoing through the room before it fades out in the silence.

"Oh, Dark Enchantress Cookie!" Shadow Milk claps his hands together, a grin on his face. "You didn't tell me you were trying to help! Gosh, and here I've been, going over all the many, many ways you tried to *ruin* my fun - and you were trying to be nice? How thoughtful!" Shadow Milk tilts his head in mock consideration, fluttering his lashes. "Ohhh, I wish you'd told me. See, I just *hate* being interrupted when I'm playing with my toys. I had to *crumble* that nasty little archer just to get the angries out."

Shadow Milk's shadowy silhouette stretches out behind him; the silhouette of a wolf bares its fangs, leering down at her in contempt. It's gone just as quickly, dissipating into nothingness

– yet the show draws no reaction as Dark Enchantress Cookie continues to swirl her glass.

“It was but a simple construct,” Dark Enchantress Cookie replies easily. “Silent Salt Cookie has made hundreds more for my army – I’m sure one won’t be missed.”

Shadow Milk plants his hands on his hips; his mind is racing at the implications, but his smile is unflinching. “So I saw! And why wasn’t I invited to the party, hm? I’d be more than happy to whip up some cardboard cut-outs for you! Where are we going? Who are we smashing?”

Dark Enchantress Cookie sips languidly at her wine; a darker tension builds in the air throughout the silence, even with the pair refusing to drop their smiles. When Dark Enchantress Cookie’s glass lowers, she swirls it once before replying:

“The Vanilla Kingdom.”

There is no flinch, no hint of a crack in Shadow Milk’s smile. The shadows around the room pulse with his anger, inching towards her in open threat - but he himself remains perfectly poised. “Oh?” He slowly tilts his head, looking her up and down. “The Vanilla Kingdom? *My* Vanilla Kingdom?” An abrupt sigh follows as Shadow Milk dramatically shakes his head back and forth. “No, no, no! That won’t do! I’m barely past the first Act of my plans, and you’re trying to rush the finale? Poor behavior, poor behavior in the theatre I say!”

“I’m well aware of your little games.” Dark Enchantress Cookie places her glass down on the mantle, keeping her gaze on Shadow Milk all the while. “My loyal pet’s kept me informed throughout these many moons – and I must say, I was impressed. At first I thought you’d betrayed us - but to see Pure Vanilla Cookie become so isolated, so distrusted by his own allies; truly, a delightful show you’ve put on.”

“Why thank you,” Shadow Milk replies unaffectedly. “All in the name of a little fun, hm? I’ve got him wrapped around my finger, just where I want him.” Shadow Milk holds out his palm; in the center, a small image of Pure Vanilla Cookie forms, trembling like a leaf. Its tiny eyes are clenched tight, huddled in on itself in open fear. “Really, he’s hardly a threat at all like this. Some of my best work.”

“Yes,” Dark Enchantress Cookie continues, gaze considering. “Such a shame about the marketplace. You’d weakened him so thoroughly, had that poison claimed him as intended...” Dark Enchantress Cookie pauses, giving Shadow Milk a sweeping once-over. “Why, we would have been rid of him entirely, had you not intervened. We’d have your Soul Jam, and I-” She smiles unpleasantly. “I would be rid of one more fool trying to stand in my way.”

Shadow Milk clenches his fist; the image of Pure Vanilla Cookie shatters in an instant. There’s a forced grin on Shadow Milk’s face as he dips into a low, flourishing bow. “I told you, Dark Enchantress Cookie - I’m just on Act One. The greatest playwright in all of Earthbread does *not* take notes, or audience participation!” A pause as Shadow Milk raises his head, meeting her gaze with narrowed eyes. “Though, I must say – you’ve been paying *attention*. And all without once inviting little ol’ me to join in on the *joke*.”

“Ah, but I would never *dream* of excluding the great Shadow Milk Cookie.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s staff taps on the floor as she approaches, cape trailing out behind her. “How was I to reach you, so cooped up in that wretched castle?”

“You could write,” Shadow Milk replies innocently.

“Oh, but there was no need,” Dark Enchantress Cookie continues with a poisonous smile. “Just as expected, you followed my pet’s trail of little magic tricks straight here. Surely you knew only I would summon you in such a way.” Her eyes glint in the low light. “Curiosity is such an effective lure, don’t you think?”

The Beast snarls at the insinuation; Shadow Milk’s hand twitches with his instinctive urge to strike, tempering it down to only a wry baring of his teeth.

“Well,” he replies finally, “here I am! And while I do *so* appreciate that go-get-em attitude, I’m afraid I need to make something clear first.” Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow to slits; the fire in the hearth flares, casting dancing shadows across the room. “I,” Shadow Milk says lowly, “am not done playing. The Vanilla Kingdom is off-limits until I say so. To you, and to any of the others.”

The room rumbles again; the glasses on the table clatter over on their sides. A single goblet tips over the edge, shattering on the floor below; Shadow Milk barely spares it a second glance. The tangible pressure he’s exerting throughout the room would bring any other Cookie to their knees – yet the one who stands before him offers no more than a leisurely tilt of her head.

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s gaze is not cowed, or angry; it is merely appraising, betrayed by an easy confidence that allows her upper lip to curl in amusement. “Shadow Milk Cookie,” she says after a moment. “Three times now, we have failed. Dark Cacao Cookie and Golden Cheese Cookie have already awakened the powers of their Soul Jam, powers they intend to wield against *us*. To say nothing of Pure Vanilla Cookie himself.”

“Pure Vanilla Cookie,” Shadow Milk remarks coolly, “will not be a problem. He is mine to do with as I see fit.”

“Your companions do not agree.”

Shadow Milk’s eyes narrow.

“Too long have we wasted battling these so-called *heroes* one by one. It is time to act, to wage a new war – a war they cannot win.” Dark Enchantress Cookie raises her staff; a beam of red light erupts from the skull’s center, casting its glow across the room. All around, foul illusions of sickly blue fire crackle to life; shadowy beasts lunge through the black, snarling as the sounds of clashing metal and screams echo through the room. The streets of the Vanilla Kingdom burn and crumble all around – Shadow Milk stills in place, watching as phantom crumbs scatter across the streets.

“Even now,” Dark Enchantress Cookie continues, “Eternal Sugar Cookie’s pursuits in the Hollyberry Kingdom have yet to come to fruition. So, no - we will not wait. The Beast

Cookies have gifted me soldiers to command with my own. We will move our forces as one, and cut the heroes down before they can reunite to oppose us.”

There’s another wave of her staff; more beastly shadows stretch across the room as sickening howls join in chorus. “In three days’ time a new moon will rise over the Vanilla Kingdom. White Magic will be at its weakest, and at that moment, we will strike.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s staff glows brightly, expression filled with dark euphoria. “Our glorious conquest,” she hisses, “will be ushered in by my hand, a hand that will rip the Soul Jam straight from Pure Vanilla Cookie’s pitiful, bleeding heart.”

Shadow Milk’s cane strikes the air; in an instant, the illusions are ripped from existence, the dying screams of beasts echoing as burning streets of the Vanilla Kingdom fade out of sight. In their wake, Shadow Milk’s own apparitions fill the room – twisting snakes baring their fangs as they slither across the carpet, hulking monstrosities of claws and fur snarl and pace in circles around them. There is barely any space between them now; even Dark Enchantress has to step back, narrowly avoiding the snap of phantom teeth.

“If you strike at him,” Shadow Milk hisses, voice slow and steady, “I will lay waste to your pitiful armies with a single flick of my cane. You test a Beast Cookie’s power with your impatience, Dark Enchantress Cookie. The Soul Jam is *mine* to claim, not yours. Not anyone else’s.”

There’s a laugh, short and cruel, before Dark Enchantress Cookie taps her staff to the ground; in an instant, Shadow Milk’s illusions are dispelled in a sickening snap of red light. “Your little *games*,” she replies evenly, “test the patience of your fellow Beasts. They are not here to play pretend, Shadow Milk Cookie. They are here to make the Soul Jam whole, Soul Jam with which I will lay waste to this wretched little world.” Her gaze sweeps over him, a cruel smile on her lips. “Besides – they *worry* for you.”

A lie. Shadow Milk picks it out instantly, even if Dark Enchantress Cookie’s voice had not wavered. “Oh?” he queries through gritted teeth. “Worried after little old me?”

“Of course.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s eyes glitter wickedly in the light. “I’ve told them all about it. To hear how terribly entangled you’ve become – how could they not worry? The great Shadow Milk Cookie, forced to serve an Ancient, all while being kept like a pet in his castle? They were all too ready to provide me with the tools I needed to *free* you, my dear Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Free me?” Shadow Milk cannot stop the harsh laugh of disbelief that follows, cannot will away the way his furious shadows seep deeper into the corners of the room. “You *dare* to think-”

“I do not think.” Dark Enchantress Cookie steps forward, undeterred. “I know. I have more than one set of eyes within the Vanilla Kingdom. I am well aware of the... situation that tied you in place.” A slow, simpering smile. “What terrible cruelty. To think Pure Vanilla Cookie would stoop so low as to binding a Beast to his will. Your companions are more than eager to spill his jam for such insolence.”

Lying. She knows, must know the truth of it all – but she’s lying, to his face, as she circles him like prey.

“I,” Shadow Milk snarls, “am not bound to *anyone*.”

“Not anymore, no.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s slow footfalls come to a stop. “The poison was meant for him, but the result is the same. You are free from the bond now, Shadow Milk Cookie – and yet you did not return. You did not slay Pure Vanilla Cookie where he stood for such insolence. Which is exactly why you have been summoned here.”

She’d planned this all along. How long had she known? How long have they been watched?

“Join us.” Dark Enchantress Cookie extends a hand up towards him, a perfect mimicry of a sickeningly familiar motion. “He holds no power over you now. What is stopping you from taking what is rightfully ours?”

“I,” Shadow Milk hisses back, “do as I wish. I am not-”

“Influenced?”

Shadow Milk’s eyes flash; the Laboratory shakes violently, dust and dirt cascading from the ceiling with the sheer force of the tremor.

“How pitiable,” Dark Enchantress Cookie murmurs, a smirk firmly in place. “To think the Beast of Deceit could be so affected by another’s illusions. It is as I warned the others – you remain under his spell, even now. You walk free, yet continue to serve him.” She takes another step forward, eyes gleaming in the dark. “You are a Beast Cookie. You have seen the truth of this world; you know it must be undone. Yet you forsake our revenge for something as petty as misguided affection? For the thief of your power, the replacement They crafted to mock your very existence? What *powerful* magics he must have woven to ensnare such a mind as yours, just to keep you at his feet.”

“My mind,” Shadow Milk snarls, darkness growing all around him, “is my *own*. I will seek my revenge on the Witches as *I* see fit.”

“Dear Shadow Milk Cookie.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s voice is slow and soothing, openly mocking him. “Do not fret. As I promised your *dear* companions, I will free you from his control very soon.” Her eyes glint wickedly. “On the night of the new moon, I will arrive at the farthest clearing of the forest, just outside that wretched kingdom’s gates. If your mind is truly your own, meet me with his Soul Jam in hand and join us for our glorious conquest across Earthbread.”

There’s a cruel smile, an openly defiant once-over. “But alas – you cannot help yourself as you are now, can you? You cannot help but turn against us, against the comrades you have embraced true darkness with hand-in-hand.” Dark Enchantress shakes her head slowly. “Oh, how they mourn, watching you kneel at the side of the Witches’ favored. Watching you betray all that you are.”

Shadow Milk stares her down; his hand tightens around his cane as he lifts his head, shoulders squaring. “What I am,” he says coolly, “is what I choose to be.” Power pulses in his palms as he looms over her, shadows swirling around him in open threat; a dark swell of magic fills the air as Shadow Milk points his cane directly at her head. “You forget yourself, Dark Enchantress Cookie,” Shadow Milk continues lowly. “My course of my fate lies in my hands alone. It is not yours to command – and neither am I.”

He’ll crumble her. Here, now. End it within the bowels of this hell, scatter her crumbs as ash upon the wind. Alone, just the two of them, dueling to their final ends. If Shadow Milk is to be destroyed here and now – he will at least make sure it is mutual.

The Soul Jam is his. The Vanilla Kingdom is his. Pure Vanilla Cookie –

Please come back to me.

...

Pure Vanilla Cookie will forgive him.

The magic coursing through Shadow Milk’s jam surges to sickening heights; it builds at the tip of his weapon, glowing in preparation to strike. There is enough power within him to level mountains, to split this smirking, spiteful Cookie cleanly in half. Yet she does not run, does not so much as flinch as the wind whips all around them, with a death blow leveled at her head.

Instead, Dark Enchantress Cookie’s eyes gleam wickedly.

It is the only warning Shadow Milk gets before all breath leaves his lungs.

Searing, unfathomable pain rips through Shadow Milk’s shoulder – it feels as if he’s being split in two. He doubles over, chest heaving; then suddenly, it feels as if he is frozen in place. His limbs do not move; his lungs still mid-breath. No sound escapes him as Shadow Milk stares blankly forward – his body goes limp, refusing to comply with his screaming, thrashing mind that begs for movement, for release. Shadow Milk is held taut and motionless in mid-air, a marionette on strings - unable to so much as gasp his surprise.

Then he’s free, able to gargle and gasp as Shadow Milk’s trembling hands shoot up to clutch mindlessly at himself. There’s pins and needles shooting through his dough; his vision is reduced to spots, little more than a murky blur. Once more he can move and breathe, once more can he taste acrid bile on his tongue. Yet above all else, Shadow Milk can feel the all-consuming pain from before rush back in full force, consuming his senses whole. There’s not even enough time to scream; all he can do is gasp, mind torn apart by the sensation.

Through the dizzying haze of pain, Shadow Milk can just scarcely make out the swimming silhouette of Dark Enchantress Cookie slowly lowering her staff, an evil smile on her lips.

“A pity. I thought perhaps a little *shock* might bring you back to your senses. No matter.”

Dark Enchantress Cookie steps forward, staff raised high above her head. “Do not fret, dear Shadow Milk Cookie. I will hold up my end of the bargain. In three days’ time, Pure Vanilla Cookie will be nothing but a memory – and you will serve the darkness once more.” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s mouth twists in a nasty grin. “After all - *my* will is absolute.”

You cannot resist the will of your creator.

The sound of Mystic Flour’s warning rings hollow in Shadow Milk’s ears.

Shadow Milk instinctively falls backwards, slipping through his portal as Dark Enchantress Cookie’s wicked laughter carries after. His heart is hammering in his chest, his body trembling – only when darkness has swallowed him in full, silencing that hideous laughter, does Shadow Milk finally allows his façade to crack in full as hot tears stream down his cheeks. The pain is unfathomable; he can feel fresh jam leaking from more than just his shoulder, staining the front of his chest he’s so desperately grasping at.

Shadow Milk’s hands curl tightly against himself; he is nearly blind with disorientation, but a sliver of light peeking through the veil calls him forward. Each staggered step sings with pain, each haggard gasp ripped from his lungs as Shadow Milk throws himself forward through the black-

When he slips from the portal, there is no energy left within him; Shadow Milk merely crumples to the floor, familiar cream-colored carpet rising up to meet him. His collapse does not go unnoticed – even through Shadow Milk’s rapidly-dimming awareness, he can hear the sound of balcony doors being thrown open. There’s hurried footsteps, a shout of words he cannot make out; hands grab at him, desperation laced in every frantic touch. Shadow Milk tries his best to clear his swimming vision, fluttering his eyes at Pure Vanilla’s hazy silhouette. He licks his lips, offering a feeble smile up before croaking out:

“I’m back.”

Chapter 30

It's not that bad.

That's what Shadow Milk tells himself every time he glances in the mirror; no matter how quickly he looks away again, the same mantra repeats in his head. It's not that bad, because he's alive. It's not that bad because he'd not been confined to weeks in the healing bay, or worse, that wretched medicine poured down his throat. It's not that bad because Pure Vanilla Cookie says it's manageable, that he'd been lucky, that the fact he'd returned at all was the only thing that mattered.

Each soft, lingering touch to Shadow Milk's cheek is a balm that soothes the wounded ache within him – only to have it ripped open anew at even a glimpse of his reflection.

It's not that bad. It's just hard to look at.

The wound in his shoulder had been manageable. Sure, it slowed him down, but it wasn't visible. Ugliness that can be concealed was barely ugliness at all. The only one who'd ever see it was Shadow Milk himself – maybe Pure Vanilla Cookie someday, but they're hardly at that point yet. As annoying as it was to feel the rotten pain persisting, it hadn't troubled Shadow Milk beyond irritation because it was ignorable. It could be swept under the rug of his immaculate outfits, a blemish that could be hidden away and out of sight.

The disfiguration of his own face, however, is a much harder pill to swallow.

As painfelled as his return had been, Shadow Milk hadn't really had the wherewithal to pinpoint every nook and cranny of the all-consuming awfulness. His chest had gotten the brunt of it; Dark Enchantress Cookie's electrical strike had even been oh-so kind enough to rip into his existing wound, now leaving Shadow Milk with a nasty, lengthy scar of black that requires twice the amount of bandaging as before. That alone would have been cruel enough – he can barely even lift his left arm now without tremendous exertion, to say nothing of how off-kilter it's thrown his balance. Being unable to float without tipping over is a new hell in and of itself; yet, even that is bearable compared to the sight of his own reflection.

The jagged spiderwebs of lightning burns are plain to see on Shadow Milk's once-perfect face, crawling up his neck just to crack his dough neatly in three right below his left eye.

It's not the only place where the scars of burnt dough linger; it's fanned out in splinters from the mark on his chest, leaving detestable patterns clear down his arm – yet none of that matters compared to how wretched Shadow Milk feels every time he touches his cheek and feels the rough, brittle crumbs flake at each press and poke.

It's not that bad. Moreover, it's stupid, it's arrogant. It's different. Shadow Milk has always been handsome, no matter what form he takes. Yet through every new glamour he casts, the wound persists; even if he can trace a hand over Lady Milk Crown Cookie's visually unblemished face, he can feel the truth lingering beneath. She hates it, hates him for making her feel it.

He hates it too.

Pure Vanilla Cookie – had tried. Honestly, his attempts at comfort just make Shadow Milk feel worse, because he doesn't have time for a pity party. Neither of them do.

Dark Enchantress Cookie is coming.

All things considered, Shadow Milk does have to give credit to Pure Vanilla's ability to act in a time of crisis. As shaken as the other had been by Shadow Milk's collapsed state upon arrival, he'd held himself together remarkably well through their rush to the healing bay. Shadow Milk barely remembers it; he just recalls talking as quickly as he could through the overwhelming disorientation, trying to get everything out before his words failed him completely. Eventually, the void had claimed him – and by the time Shadow Milk had awoken hours later to a room filled with nurses and guards, Pure Vanilla was gone.

Shadow Milk hadn't blamed him; honestly, he wouldn't have it any other way. An army is not easily raised in such little time.

The crux of their problem does not lie with the Vanilla Kingdom's capabilities; the intricate technology and magic built into the very heart of the Vanillian land is impressive, deceptively so. Any army that marches upon the streets will be sorely tested by the Golems that Shadow Milk can spy from his bedroom window even now, to say nothing of the soldiers and mages at Pure Vanilla's command. The might of their forces are impressive to many, would give Shadow Milk himself a run for his money if tested.

The issue is that for all the Vanilla Kingdom's might, it pales in comparison to what's coming.

Shadow Milk hadn't been present for the Dark Flour War, but he remembers it. Standing alone, Dark Enchantress Cookie had been a formidable threat – yet back then, she'd had to rely on Pure Vanilla Cookie's absence to strike at his kingdom. Now, she'd summoned Shadow Milk to her lair to declare her intent outright, had given a time and place for when and where to expect her. There is no duplicity needed, as strong as she's become.

At least, as she'd have them believe.

There's something that doesn't sit right with Shadow Milk, something beyond their impending destruction. Dark Enchantress Cookie's summons had been bold, incredibly so, to the point of luring him away with not one but multiple whiffs of Dark Moon Magic. She could have easily struck from the shadows with no warning; yet, she had not merely requested his presence, but outright demanded it.

Why?

It's a problem that Shadow Milk's still puzzling out, secluded in the safety of his room as he paces and plots. He lacks the energy to sustain his dazzling illusions, instead resorting to scribbling on papers before summarily discarding them in a flash of fire. His mind will not grant him the rest his body sorely needs, but it's of little consequence. Shadow Milk has always been an overthinker, and he's not about to stop now.

The simplest reason for his summon is the exact thing that keeps Shadow Milk confined to his room – weakening him. Shadow Milk can scarcely summon a portal in this state, much less transport the neighboring kingdoms' armies through them. Granted, beings that lacked neither Dark Moon Magic attunement nor the power of Soul Jams were poorly suited for traversal through his realm; any attempts to drag Dark Cacao Cookie's armies through the void would result in at least half of them crumbling apart at the seams, and the others just going outright mad. Dark Cacao Cookie would probably be able to bear it, but Shadow Milk would have to go and find him alone – yet he barely has the energy to remain upright, much less fly long enough to find his way to a kingdom he's never been to. Chances are he'll collapse before even making it halfway there.

He'd still offered. It's on the table.

Pure Vanilla's sent out every missive he can; in the short time since Shadow Milk's return, they've managed to receive confirmation that the Crème Republic's preliminary forces are already on their way, along with Parfaedian mages to help bolster the magical wards. While they've yet to receive any word from the Golden Cheese or Dark Cacao Kingdom, the letters will take too long to reach as it is – if the other kingdoms are to join the battle, it will be during the siege, not before. Even White Lily Cookie's shade cannot be roused; every attempt by Pure Vanilla and Shadow Milk alike has resulted in naught but silence, as if the connection to her consciousness has suddenly been cut.

Shadow Milk has a funny little feeling Dark Enchantress Cookie's *pet* has been playing in the gardens again.

There is no stillness to be found elsewhere; the streets of the Vanilla Kingdom have been alive with constant movement ever since the announcement. Citizens gather what they can for those ready to flee their homes, with Black Raisin Cookie and the local police leading the evacuation. They have the luxury of warning this time; it seems many are willing to take it, as airships descending from the floating city without end.

Good. The less innocents involved, the better Pure Vanilla will be able to concentrate on the task at hand.

Yet, even that observation brings Shadow Milk back to the unending query of why they've had the warning in the first place. Shadow Milk is weakened, yes, but Pure Vanilla is still a powerful Ancient in his own right. He's using the time to rally his forces, to build meaningful opposition – at the very least, more opposition than Dark Enchantress Cookie would have to face otherwise. It could be as simple as wanting a bigger audience to crush him under the might of her forces, yet Shadow Milk very much doubts that in the same breath.

Dark Enchantress Cookie is playing a game, and Shadow Milk already knows he's one of the pieces.

The loss of control Shadow Milk had felt in the Laboratorium has been haunting him ever since; to feel his body unwilling to obey his commands, to freeze helplessly at the mercy of such a powerful enemy was not easily forgotten. Dark Enchantress Cookie had been making a point, and coupled with Mystic Flour Cookie's warning, it was one that was impossible to miss.

Shadow Milk's body is not his own.

In another life, Shadow Milk might have admired Dark Enchantress Cookie's foresight; to bring back beings as powerful as the Beast Cookies is no easy feat, to say nothing of the power they wielded with vicious authority. A sort of... safeguard against such ferocity is rather prudent, all things considered. To be able to hold command over such forces would make Dark Enchantress Cookie unparalleled in might – hell, Shadow Milk probably would have done it himself if he'd had the opportunity.

That doesn't mean he has to like it now.

Above all else, the knowledge of the new shock collar around his neck presents another problem, one that Shadow Milk doesn't have an easy solution to. If he joins the battlefield at Pure Vanilla's side, he's a liability – one flick of Dark Enchantress Cookie's staff and he's helpless, something to defend rather than a terror from above. Worse, he may become an outright threat; there's no way of telling just how far Dark Enchantress Cookie's control over his body might extend. Shadow Milk has no intention of being forced to turn on the very people he's trying to protect.

Yet if Shadow Milk runs, he leaves Pure Vanilla without his best chance against the combined might of the Beasts.

Shadow Milk does have to hand it to her – Dark Enchantress Cookie has played her hand well. There's an uncertainty to her schemes that leaves him on edge; even outright admitting she's planted a spy among them provides Shadow Milk with very little to capitalize on. Without knowing who it is, not for certain anyway, Shadow Milk doesn't even have the luxury to manipulate them back. They're in the castle, certainly – it's the only possible way for Shadow Milk to have been spied on so effortlessly, for Dark Enchantress Cookie to know what she knows – but trying to secretly weed out the culprit from a staff Shadow Milk's barely spoken to would be suspicious at best, and an obvious ploy at worst.

Perhaps more impressively, Dark Enchantress Cookie's managed to masterfully turn Shadow Milk's own companions against him. Simply contacting the Beasts as it is will do nothing; she's already convinced them he's under Pure Vanilla's control, and Shadow Milk demanding the Vanilla Kingdom's safety will hardly dissuade them from that line of thinking. Any move he makes to defend Pure Vanilla Cookie will be taken poorly, by either convincing them of the Ancient's guilt or enraging them with Shadow Milk's open betrayal.

There isn't an easy out – beyond the one Dark Enchantress Cookie's offered him.

The remark about the clearing has been bugging Shadow Milk, has been the cause of more than one split lip that he chews aggressively in thought. Certainly, it could have been in jest – they both know the game Dark Enchantress Cookie is playing. She knows that Shadow Milk would never arrive with Pure Vanilla's Soul Jam in hand, yet had made the offer anyway. A taunt? An attempt to lure him away? Or perhaps one final attempt for his voluntary compliance?

It's not unthinkable. In fact, it's likely. Shadow Milk is still a force to be reckoned with. If Dark Enchantress Cookie's schemes fail, it's better to have Shadow Milk on her side rather

than enraged and ready to expose her to the Beasts. If she fails, if she stumbles even a little – all of this will go up in smoke. Dark Enchantress Cookie has shown her hand precisely because she wants Shadow Milk to believe it's unbeatable.

Which means, it isn't.

All Shadow Milk has to do is find the cracks in her grand design to send it all tumbling down. Easier said than done - but not impossible.

He just has to think, with not a lot of time to do it.

Unfortunately, Shadow Milk doesn't have all his answers by the time night rolls around. He hadn't even realized dusk had fallen, eyes closed and mind racing for hours, until the lock on his door clicks and causes his eyes to snap open to a darkened room. When Shadow Milk turns around, it's to see Pure Vanilla stepping in; their gazes meet, each quickly searching over the other for signs of distress.

How laughable. They both look terrible.

Pure Vanilla smiles, a clear contrast to the weariness behind his eyes. "How are you-?"

"I'm fine," Shadow Milk interrupts promptly, using his cane to steady himself as he crosses the room. "Tell me about the preparations."

The smile on Pure Vanilla's face turns wry. "You have not rested as I asked, have you?"

"You don't need me to rest." Shadow Milk taps his cane once for effect. "You need me to plan. And to plan, I have to know everything. So tell me about the preparations."

Pure Vanilla sighs; he takes a few steps back, lowering himself down to the edge of Shadow Milk's bed with an audible groan. "No word from the others yet. The Crème Republic's airships arrive tomorrow afternoon. Parfaedia should be joining them soon after."

Not a lot of time to situate their troops before the fateful night falls – but then, Dark Enchantress Cookie hadn't given them much time to begin with.

Shadow Milk doesn't join Pure Vanilla on the bed; instead he paces, the ache in his chest throbbing with each jostle. It's an ache that helps center him, ground him as his mind keeps picking over every potentiality before him. "What about the wards? The reserve Golems? Has that little pipsqueak got them up and running?"

"Can you sit?"

"You don't need me to-"

"I do." Pure Vanilla pats the bed beside him. "Please."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes; there's a moment of being stubborn, frayed nerves making him petulant. Finally he acquiesces, sullenly shuffling over and dropping down with an audible

huff. The bed creaks under his weight, and Shadow Milk has to fight back a grimace at the twinge in his shoulder from the movement.

He hates this. He wants to start pacing again.

“The Golems are all online.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is patient, as if he’s trying to reassure Shadow Milk instead of himself. “We have enough power to keep even the auxiliary units up for several days. Strawberry Crepe Cookie has done an admirable job. The Wafflebots they put together are already patrolling outside the walls.”

“And the wards?” Shadow Milk replies impatiently. “They can’t be all done. I don’t feel them.”

“Disrupting pylons have been placed in all vulnerable areas. Dark Enchantress Cookie will not be able to conjure her minions from within the walls.” Pure Vanilla’s hand touches gently on Shadow Milk’s own; normally, this would be comforting, but the warmth feels electric on Shadow Milk’s jittery dough. “The outlying areas are still in progress. We’ll need the Parfaedian delegation to arrive to finish them.”

“It won’t be enough.” Shadow Milk fights back the urge to stand, but just barely. “Let me go find Dark Cacao Cookie.”

“No.” Firm and absolute. “You can barely stand. Look at yourself.”

Shadow Milk flinches instinctively; in an instant Pure Vanilla’s hand clasps tight atop his own. “Oh, darling. Not like that.” A gentle, apologetic squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Shadow Milk is keeping his eyes on the floor, trying to will his heartbeat to slow. “It’s fine.”

The *darling* hangs in the air, but Shadow Milk can’t bear to address it. Not right now.

“Dark Cacao Cookie will come.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is so steady, so gentled. “So will the others. We can hold out. The Vanilla Kingdom will not fall in a single night.”

A lie. A pretty lie, one Shadow Milk desperately wants to believe.

He can’t.

“It won’t be enough,” Shadow Milk repeats, eyes on the floor. “Dark Enchantress Cookie doesn’t need the element of surprise. Whatever she’s bringing, she already knows it will be enough to destroy you.”

Pure Vanilla sighs, low and soft. “She has underestimated me before.”

Shadow Milk’s teeth grit. “And what,” he spits, “did it cost you?”

It’s unfair to say, a low blow at best. Pure Vanilla doesn’t dignify it with a response, just continues gently brushing his hand over Shadow Milk’s own. Heavy silence settles over them, broken only by the gentle ticking of the grandfather clock. The air around them feels

unbearably cold; even with Pure Vanilla's warmth pressed to his side, Shadow Milk can't help but long to move, to flap his arms, to-

Run.

"I have to do something." It's a pointless thing to say; Shadow Milk barely knows why it leaves his lips. Yet he can feel Pure Vanilla shift beside him, head tilting to the right.

"What do you think you need to do?"

"I don't know." Shadow Milk continues staring at the floor. "I've thought it over a million times. There are too many possibilities. I don't know which move is the right one."

"Then perhaps that's not the right question." Pure Vanilla's hand lifts, gently brushing back the hair from Shadow Milk's eyes. "Instead, what do you need to happen? Regardless of what you have to do to get there – what do you want to be waiting at the end?"

"You."

It's another instinctive reply, one that feels too raw and wounded even as it leaves Shadow Milk's lips. It earns him a gentle kiss to his uninjured cheek, but even that doesn't help the storm raging in Shadow Milk's chest.

"I love you too," Pure Vanilla replies gently. "But perhaps, something more specific. It might help to talk it out."

"I-"

Shadow Milk pauses. Blinks. He turns his head, shooting Pure Vanilla an incredulous look; the other simply smiles back. "Go on," Pure Vanilla says coaxingly. "Try it. What do you want to happen on that night?"

Pure Vanilla isn't addressing it. Perhaps Shadow Milk had misheard?

There's another long pause; Shadow Milk looks away, the surprise of it all momentarily jolting him from anxiety into outright confusion. "I... want Dark Enchantress Cookie to leave the Vanilla Kingdom alone."

"As do I." Pure Vanilla's tone is calm, yet assured. "As she has promised to come, perhaps we can focus on convincing her to leave."

"She won't," Shadow Milk replies dismissively. "She's here for your Soul Jam. With such an army at her disposal, she won't stop until she has it."

"What if I gave it to her?"

Shadow Milk recoils instantly with a look of disbelief; Pure Vanilla merely smiles back. "I'm not saying I'm *planning* to," the other continues. "We're just talking it out. Seeing as it's what she wants most – what if I give it to her?"

“You can’t give it to her,” Shadow Milk replies after a moment. “She wouldn’t just leave. You’re still a threat, Soul Jam or not. If she left you alive, you could rise up against her again.”

Yet – there’s still an inkling of something, a fraction of a thought forming in Shadow Milk’s mind.

“Okay.” Pure Vanilla nods his head. “I can’t give it to her. What happens when I don’t give it to her?”

“She’ll use the army given to her by the Beasts.” Shadow Milk lifts his hand to his chin, gnawing idly on his lower lip. “She needs them. Her own forces weren’t powerful enough to strike before, but with their aid, she could take any kingdom she likes.”

“And what if she didn’t have the army?”

Shadow Milk scoffs, tilting his head. “Planning on wiping them out?”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “Do you have a way to?”

“Not even close.” Shadow Milk sighs, rolling his injured shoulder with a wince. “Not as I am. She’d stop me – or worse, use me to crush you.”

“Then...” Pure Vanilla hums. “Back to the army. What if she didn’t have them? What if you convinced the Beasts to withdraw their troops?”

“They won’t listen.” Shadow Milk shakes his head back and forth. “They’re convinced I’m under your spell. Begging them to not harm you hardly disproves that. They’re only listening to Dark Enchantress Cookie right now.”

“Then what if Dark Enchantress Cookie convinced them?”

Shadow Milk blinks, returning his gaze to Pure Vanilla with a furrowed brow. “What?”

Pure Vanilla simply gives him a considering look. “Is it impossible?”

“Of course,” Shadow Milk snaps. “She’d never-”

Wait.

Shadow Milk pauses mid-syllable; his tongue clicks, mind turning over Pure Vanilla’s words in his head. It’s a nugget of... something, another piece to add to his collection. Yet this one shines, glittering atop his pile of possibilities as Shadow Milk begins re-sorting the possible timelines in his mind. One idea slots here, another there; it’s as if he’s lining up corners of a puzzle, and he’s just found an outer edge.

Apparently Shadow Milk lapses into silence too long; he distantly notes Pure Vanilla’s saying something, but he’s far too deep in thought to pay it any mind. He’s vaguely aware of hands upon him, gently guiding him backwards – which is fine. Shadow Milk’s restless anxiety is now singularly focused on the possibilities slotting into place in front of him; he’s barely

noticed how his gaze has shifted from the floor to the ceiling until the mattress creaks loudly beneath him.

He's being tucked into bed. Sneakily, too.

Pure Vanilla at least has the decency to settle in beside him, which is nice. If Shadow Milk's going to get sent to bed, he's taking the other down with him either way. Still, the mild indignity of it all is enough to warrant a scowl, even if Pure Vanilla simply meets it with a small smile.

"I'm not tired," Shadow Milk gripes, shifting restlessly under the blankets.

"There he is," Pure Vanilla replies easily. "Hello, Shadow Milk Cookie."

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. "I didn't go anywhere, you sap."

"You went quiet on me. I thought perhaps you'd drifted off with your eyes open."

"I was just thinking. I'm still thinking." Shadow Milk lifts his head, trying to reposition it on the pillows. "It's what I'm good at."

"I wish you'd be good at resting." Pure Vanilla's hand reaches up from the blankets, gently stroking just under Shadow Milk's eye. "You're exhausted. You don't need to wear yourself out like this."

Shadow Milk stares up at his ceiling; it's a little strange, seeing it devoid of the writhing black pit he'd once cultivated above. "I've already wasted half a day asleep. We only have two more days before the night of the new moon."

"Nothing bad will come of a short rest," Pure Vanilla promises. "Your mind will be clearer. You'll find the solution you've been searching for."

"Hah," Shadow Milk snorts. "You say that like you're sure."

"I am."

Shadow Milk glances over; Pure Vanilla's gaze is soft, a smile on his lips. "I am sure," Pure Vanilla continues quietly. "You'll find a way. After all..." Pure Vanilla's hand gently lowers, cupping the side of Shadow Milk's cheek. "You are the cleverest, handsomest Cookie in all of Earthbread."

There's another snort as Shadow Milk averts his eyes. "Afraid I've lost one of those titles for the moment."

"No." Pure Vanilla's voice is firm, yet still so soft. "You haven't. You have never been more beautiful to me than you are now."

Shadow Milk can feel his cheeks flush, even as he pointedly keeps his gaze on the wall.

"Well. What would you know? Half-blind old fool."

“I know I love you.”

A new sort of silence follows – one that’s marred by the sharp inhale of breath that sticks in Shadow Milk’s throat. His gaze is still on the wall; slowly, carefully, he turns his head towards the other.

Pure Vanilla is gazing back at him, eyes lidded with an air of complete contentment.

“So,” Shadow Milk says after a moment. “You did say it earlier.”

“I did,” Pure Vanilla affirms effortlessly.

Shadow Milk’s eyes flick up and down Pure Vanilla’s unbothered expression. “Why?”

“Why do I love you?” Pure Vanilla queries. “Or, why did I say it?”

“The latter.” Shadow Milk keeps watching Pure Vanilla, waiting for the slightest sign of – something. A hint of misgivings. Of hesitation. Regret.

“It felt right.” Pure Vanilla’s answer is so simple, so unapologetic. “Perhaps it was not the perfect time to declare my feelings. But in that moment, it felt like the most honest thing I could say. So I said it.”

“You’re worried.” Shadow Milk’s tone comes out accusing – he can’t stop himself. “We’re on the brink of ruin. You’re rushing into things.”

“I am certain of my feelings.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze is unflinching. “I have been for some time now.”

“Fool.” The word is reflexive, frighteningly so. “You aren’t. You’re just scared. If you’re trying to comfort me, it’s not working.”

Pure Vanilla lifts a brow. “Do you feel comforted, knowing I love you?”

Shadow Milk sharply turns his head away. “No.”

“Good.”

This immediately draws Shadow Milk’s attention back with a baffled look.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says patiently, “you have ever struggled to trust me. I knew what I felt for you was real. Yes, the bond strengthened my emotions at the time, but they were still mine. And they remain mine, long after its cessation.” Pure Vanilla shifts under the covers, brushing his hair from his face. “I wanted you to stay with me. To spend time with me, play games, and enjoy my company. I wanted to see the world hand in hand and dance beneath starlight in your arms.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze softens, a shy smile on his lips. “I wanted to kiss you, hold you close and never let you go. These are my feelings. They have not changed.”

“I changed you.” The words feel desperate as they leave Shadow Milk’s lips. “You know I did.”

Pure Vanilla glances to the side briefly with a thoughtful look. “You... levied my concerns about my duties and people, this is true. Certainly shifted how I comported myself. So, yes, I would have acted differently.” The smile returns. “But even now, as I am – I still want. Looking back on our time together and spending my days with you now, I am more sure than I have ever been.”

“So why,” Shadow Milk replies hoarsely, “is it *good* that I am not comforted?”

“Because now you know I am not simply saying it to make you happy.” Pure Vanilla’s eyes glitter with gentle amusement. “I am saying it because I believe it. Call it an ugly truth if you must, but a truth it remains.”

Shadow Milk swallows thickly; he wants to turn away again, wants to refuse how thoroughly Pure Vanilla’s pinned him with his gaze. The other’s looking him over so easily, picking Shadow Milk apart at the seams; Pure Vanilla even props himself up with an elbow, pausing for a moment as if to drink in the sight before he slowly leans in close.

They’re scarcely an inch apart like this. Shadow Milk can feel the other’s long hair cascading down and brushing against his dough, tickling as Pure Vanilla slowly cocks his head to the side.

“Shadow Milk Cookie.”

A swallow, thick and pained as Shadow Milk stares back.

Pure Vanilla’s eyes glimmer in the dark, twin pools of fondness and open longing. “May I kiss you?”

Right. Shadow Milk has already screwed this up once. He needs to get this perfect. He needs something suave, something cool and collected. He needs to absolutely nail this, because this moment will be framed and hung in their minds for the rest of eternity.

Shadow Milk licks his lips, tasting Pure Vanilla’s heady scent on his tongue. He steels his nerves, squares his shoulders, then opens his mouth to rasp a deep and husky:

“Okey-dokey.”

Pure Vanilla’s smile twitches, but Shadow Milk can barely glimpse it before two soft lips are being pressed against his own.

Ah.

That’s right. How could he have ever forgotten this?

Kissing Pure Vanilla Cookie feels nice.

There's no desperation in this kiss, no ravenous hunger like before. It is slow and sweet, lingering for several moments before they pull away again. Pure Vanilla brushes his hand through Shadow Milk's hair, even as his own trails across them - a curtain that shields them from any prying eyes. Shadow Milk's unsure of his own expression; his mind is filled solely with the image of Pure Vanilla Cookie leaning over him, soft and beautiful in the glow of moonlight.

Shadow Milk's right hand comes up, catching at the nape of Pure Vanilla's neck; without hesitation, Pure Vanilla allows himself to be yanked down into another kiss.

This one feels – greedier. The nerves are slinking back into Shadow Milk's dough, or perhaps the mounting adrenaline racing through his dough is to blame. Every shy press of their bodies, every breath gasped against his lips is devoured with covetous reverence before Shadow Milk's being pulled back under again. It feels as if the whole room is cloaked in the scent of warm vanilla; it's the only thing he can think about, the only taste on his tongue as their lips part to deepen each kiss.

It's exhilarating, dizzyingly so – and baffling in equal measure. How had he ever gone without this? How had he held himself back this long, ever denied himself this feeling even for a moment?

Pure Vanilla had been right to wait. To test him. Shadow Milk feels positively drunk on the sheer presence of the man bearing down on him. In this moment he would do anything, *anything* to keep this feeling forever, to eternally savor Pure Vanilla kissing him as if it's the last chance they'll ever have.

If this is meant to double as some form of encouragement, it's definitely working. Shadow Milk feels ready to level a mountain - maybe two, if Pure Vanilla keeps massaging his hips like this.

There's no pulling away from Shadow Milk this time, no building feeling of being overwhelmed like before. The Soul Jams hum, a beacon of warmth that grows with each careless brush over one another – but they do not consume. Instead, Pure Vanilla's kisses feel steadying, almost remarkably so. If given the time, Shadow Milk could find himself lying back and being doted on for hours like this – finds he wants that, actually. Pure Vanilla may be slightly more tempered, but each touch and press against him feels just as laced with desire as before.

The room isn't just warm, it's scorching – gasps have become pants as Pure Vanilla's hands tangle in Shadow Milk's hair, pressing their lips together with such intensity that Shadow Milk no longer recalls how to breathe.

This lasts a while – Shadow Milk thinks it does, with what little sense of self he has left – yet it's also over far too quickly. When Pure Vanilla finally pulls away, properly this time, Shadow Milk can't help the groan of disappointment from slipping past his lips. Even when he chases after, Pure Vanilla only returns to kiss his neck, gently guiding Shadow Milk back down with soothing strokes against his cheek. There's some small shushing that, had Shadow Milk any scraps of dignity left, he would take offense to, but can't bring himself to care when Pure Vanilla follows it up with another kiss to his injured cheek.

“It’s alright,” Pure Vanilla promises softly. “I’m right here.” A hand smooths over Shadow Milk’s forehead. “But you need to rest.”

Right. Like Shadow Milk’s going to be sleeping after *that*.

Unfortunately, Shadow Milk doesn’t quite have the wherewithal to voice such a complaint; he resorts instead to an eloquent grunt of disapproval. This earns him a soft chuckle from Pure Vanilla, and one more kiss to his cheek. “I,” Pure Vanilla adds, “also need to rest. I’d like to do it beside you.”

Fine. That’s a much better argument in his favor.

The pair settle into a familiar embrace, tucking themselves back under the now too-warm sheets. Even with Shadow Milk’s heart still racing in his chest, it’s a bit soothing to find himself nestling back into his favorite spot against Pure Vanilla’s neck. The other’s chin comes to rest atop Shadow Milk’s head, just how Pure Vanilla likes, as a slow and perhaps deceptively steady sigh follows.

Shadow Milk can feel Pure Vanilla’s heart racing too.

A comfortable sort of silence follows, one that Shadow Milk can work with. While Pure Vanilla’s – distraction had been pleasant, incredibly so, it’s somehow not at the forefront of Shadow Milk’s mind. It’s a sparkling, luminescent feeling that he’s treasuring, yes, but it’s also something he’s delicately setting to the side for now. He’ll place it on a nice satin pillow, give it a little dust-off; but more than anything, Shadow Milk needs to get back to thinking.

Pure Vanilla pinches him.

Shadow Milk hisses under his breath, tilting his head to see Pure Vanilla looking down at him with an air of amusement. “I can practically hear you plotting. Go to sleep.”

“I don’t need sleep,” Shadow Milk argues back. “We’ve been over this.”

“You do.” Pure Vanilla’s arms tighten gently. “Just for an hour or so, at least. Please?”

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Are you going to keep pinching me if I say no?”

“No,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “But, I will get up and go sleep in my own bed.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Pure Vanilla hums, nuzzling his cheek against the top of Shadow Milk’s head. “Only if you don’t rest. At least try. Please?”

Shadow Milk harrumphs loudly. “Fine. I’ll try.” He won’t. Not really. “I’m doing you a favor, you know. You should act like it.”

“I am very grateful,” Pure Vanilla murmurs back softly. “But I wish to look after you, just as you look after me.” A hand gently brushes over Shadow Milk’s injured cheek. “I fear I have failed in that twice now.”

“Oh, stop blaming yourself,” Shadow Milk sighs back. “We’re only in this mess because of the bond. If I’d just destroyed you from the start like I was supposed to, none of this would have happened.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles softly into Shadow Milk’s hair. “That is... one way to look at things.” There’s a sudden pause; the hand on Shadow Milk’s cheek stills. “May I ask you something?”

Shadow Milk’s lips twitch with a smirk. “Are you going to make me say it?”

Another huff of a laugh before Pure Vanilla continues: “To be fair, it is more of a request than a question.”

“Request away.” Shadow Milk burrows closer under the covers. “I happen to be in a fleetingly good mood.”

Pure Vanilla shifts slightly; his other free hand slides out from beneath his side, coming up to gently rest against Shadow Milk’s chest. “I know you are clever and strong,” Pure Vanilla says softly. “But so am I. So are my people. I do not wish you to feel as if this fight is your burden to carry alone. Dark Enchantress Cookie would have come for my Soul Jam, one way or another.”

“I want to help,” Shadow Milk retorts. “You need that help.”

“I’m not asking you not to help,” Pure Vanilla replies gently. “If you devise a plan to overcome this, I will trust it. And I know you will. You’re too clever not to, even if I wish you’d not run yourself ragged in its pursuit. I just...” A sigh follows. “I just want you to be safe. Whatever we do, however we make our stand – please. Do not put yourself at risk for my sake.”

Shadow Milk’s gaze drops back to the pillows. “I can’t promise that.”

“Please.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is so soft, so fragile. “Shadow Milk Cookie. I have already watched you bleed for me twice now. I have already feared that you would never open your eyes, or that I would never see you again. Please, please - do not make me bear it a third time.”

“This is a war,” Shadow Milk rasps back. “We’re all going to bleed.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla’s own eyes have shut, his forehead lowered to press against Shadow Milk’s own. “Just... whatever we do, however you plan – please see yourself as I do. Someone to protect.”

“Aw.” Shadow Milk’s lips twist in a cracked smile. “You’re worried about me.”

“Yes.” Pure Vanilla’s laugh is strained. “I am *very* worried. About you. My kingdom. My people.”

“Yourself?”

Pure Vanilla sighs. “I would trade myself away for them a thousand times over.”

“Hypocrite.” Shadow Milk gives him a nudge. “You’re asking me to treasure myself, but you won’t do the same for yourself? I happen to love you too, you know.”

“I know.” Pure Vanilla presses another kiss to Shadow Milk’s forehead. “I trust your plans to protect me. Perhaps it is hypocritical, coming from myself – but I would like them to protect you, too. That’s all.”

“Fool.” Shadow Milk cranes his neck up, managing to nuzzle just under Pure Vanilla’s chin. “I hadn’t planned on throwing myself away. What’s the point of you if there’s no me around to enjoy it?”

A lie. A pretty lie, but one that still manages to draw a smile to Pure Vanilla’s face.

“Besides,” Shadow Milk continues, “I don’t even have a plan yet. Which is why I need to think, which is why you should stop seducing me and let me get back to work.”

A sharp flush alights on Pure Vanilla’s cheeks, but his smile is wry as he retorts: “One hour. That’s all I ask.”

“Fine.” Shadow Milk settles back into the pillows, rolling his eyes. “I’ll just plan in my dreams.”

“A meager victory,” Pure Vanilla hums, “but I shall take it nonetheless.” Shadow Milk can feel the other shifting in the bed, repositioning himself for sleep. “Good night, Shadow Milk.”

Shadow Milk grunts back.

A new sort of quiet descends upon the room. Pure Vanilla’s breaths are slowing; Shadow Milk counts them out, attempting to refocus his mind to the rhythm. Yet he finds with each slow, passing breath, his own fatigue is steadily creeping up on him. There’s even a yawn that slips out of him as his mind begins to wander – not to his plans, not to Dark Enchantress Cookie’s looming threat, but to the feeling of Pure Vanilla’s hands gently caressing his waist.

Perhaps their little foray had been a bit *too* distracting.

Shadow Milk does his best to concentrate, yet finds his thoughts slipping away again and again. He’s tired, he’s warm; the slow rise and fall of Pure Vanilla’s chest against him is dangerously hypnotic, lulling Shadow Milk closer and closer to the edges of sleep. He doesn’t *need* to, doesn’t really want to – except his increasingly fragile body is starting to disagree.

Ugh. Fine. He had promised an hour of rest, and just one won’t kill him. Perhaps Pure Vanilla is right; perhaps resting his frazzled mind will actually help.

Doubtful, but worth a shot.

Shadow Milk exhales slowly as the tension leaves his shoulders; he can feel Pure Vanilla shift slightly with a soft noise before the other’s drifting away again. Shadow Milk allows his

eyelids to flutter, slowing his breaths to match Pure Vanilla's own as a sense of comfort settles over him.

A quick doze. A nap at most. Just a few more minutes of drifting off in Pure Vanilla's arms.

He's earned that, hasn't he?

Shadow Milk's eyes slip shut for only a moment.

A bird chirps outside his window.

When Shadow Milk's eyes snap open again, it's to the gentle light of dawn spilling in through his windows. A chatter of birdsong follows, wings fluttering about impatiently just outside Shadow Milk's ledge. There's even a few taps with their beaks on the glass, an impetuous demand for the presence of a certain mussy-haired Cookie who is still fast asleep at Shadow Milk's side.

It's a small wonder they'd managed to locate him in the first place, but it's not a mystery Shadow Milk has any time to give thought to.

He'd slept. He'd even dreamed – and now, awake and alert, Shadow Milk's mind surges with possibilities. Pure Vanilla's remarks from earlier echo like a guiding call; the plans Shadow Milk had made and discarded for faults now stand before him at the ready, offering new potency with what he can and can't pluck from their offerings. Every terrifyingly winding path of what could and might be is now narrowed to a singular point, laid out before him with sharpening clarity.

Shadow Milk's hand is curling in Pure Vanilla's collar before he even consciously registers the action; he hauls the other up, staring face-to-face as Pure Vanilla shudders to wakefulness. His morning breath is awful, yawned right in Shadow Milk's face as his tired eyes blink with agonizing slowness. There's several moments of visible disorientation; Shadow Milk can perfectly visualize the gears turning in the other's head before Pure Vanilla's consciousness has been roused enough for a simple: "G'mrn."

"Good morning," Shadow Milk replies. His own gaze is searching, mind still slotting every piece into its new perfect place. He knows – not what he *has* to do, but an option. It's something new, something that's sparking with powerful potential. Perhaps not a way out, but a way forward.

Shadow Milk looks Pure Vanilla over one final time before abruptly announcing:

"I have a plan."

Pure Vanilla offers a sleepy little smile, one that Shadow Milk interrupts with a steady:

"But you're not going to like it."

The remainder of the day is spent apart.

It's all a blur, really – Pure Vanilla is occupied at the helm of his forces, helping guide the new arriving forces and strategizing with his council. The Crème Republic's soldiers bolster the Vanilla Kingdom's ranks with the might of their Paladins, and the mages of Parfaedia quickly flock to reinforce as many wards and barriers as they're able to erect. A shimmering dome of magic had already encased the walls themselves – yet with the help of Parfaedia, it's been strengthened into a gleaming shield of light.

Shadow Milk takes as much note of new developments as he can; he cannot see much from his room, but Pure Vanilla sends him letters by bird as often as he can. As relatively convenient as it is, the fat little pests always want birdseed for their effort, and peck Shadow Milk's hands if he's too slow to give it.

It's fine. The pain is minimal, sometimes jolts Shadow Milk out of a reverie he hadn't noticed slipping into. His walls have become plastered with papers as he finetunes the details, outlining every potential he can think of – and yet still, it only feels half-satisfactory.

There's a lot that can go wrong.

It's a good plan, sort of. It's the best he's got, even if the risks he takes are far from ideal. Shadow Milk had even begun to discard it half-way, before reconsidering over lunch. Each new train of thought gets another thumbtack into his board, each possible outcome another sketched-out plan of attack to refute it. The bones are there. The potential is palpable.

It's just risky.

When night falls again, he and Pure Vanilla reconvene for a second time. There's no tangling in the sheets, no passionate kissing to wash away the day's strain. They simply stand on Pure Vanilla's balcony side by side, staring up at the sliver of moon that will be washed away far too soon.

“Do you have everything you need?”

Pure Vanilla's query is quiet, carries a solemnity Shadow Milk hasn't heard in some time. He nods his head once, before replying: “I think so. I have most of the lines already written out.”

“No improv?” Pure Vanilla's attempting a joke, even if the thinness of his smile betrays his weariness.

“Can't plan for improv,” Shadow Milk replies evenly. “She's already surprised me once. I can't guarantee anything. Are the wards in place?”

“Yes. As many as we could erect without drawing attention.”

“Good.”

Pure Vanilla's gaze lowers from the sky; Shadow Milk can feel it rest upon his dough. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"No." Shadow Milk's hands flex upon the railing. "Are you?"

"I trust you."

Weighty. A non-answer, though an attempt to soothe no doubt.

"If I fail," Shadow Milk begins.

"You won't."

"If I fail," Shadow Milk repeats, turning his head to meet Pure Vanilla's tired eyes. "You know what you have to do."

Pure Vanilla's own eyes flutter shut. He does not reply.

"My chest is already fractured." Shadow Milk taps just below his neck. "Right here, if you-"

"Don't."

It's half-command, half-plea. Shadow Milk obeys regardless, swallowing as he returns his gaze to the sky.

Right. He needs to be sensitive. He's already asking a lot.

"It'll work." Pure Vanilla's the one to speak now, voice steady with a resolve Shadow Milk lacks. "And if it doesn't, we'll find another way."

Shadow Milk simply nods, staring up at the sliver of moonlight high above.

A day left. A pitiful, paltry day to slot every piece in place. It'll pass before he knows it.

All that's left is to wait for the final sun to set before the curtain will rise, an opening act and finale all in one. Every part must be played to perfection if they are to have even a chance.

Pure Vanilla's hand gently covers Shadow Milk's own, a steady squeeze as Shadow Milk exhales a low breath.

Opening night jitters are always the worst.

--

A new moon symbolizes a fresh start.

He'd read that once, long ago. It's meant to be a time of quiet reflection, a period of contemplation while the magics tied to the celestial body is in flux. Where once students had led their lives and guided their spells beneath gentle moonlight, the nights of a new moon were spent in darkness. Observations were to be done inwardly, to contemplate on one's next step without the moon's illumination to show them the way.

Perhaps on another night, she would have welcomed him. Her steady watch over the Cookies of this world is unending, a duty she has never forsaken - but she still might have smiled to see Shadow Milk Cookie gazing upon her with such quiet reverence tonight.

Instead, a deep darkness has settled over the land in her absence. Upon reflection, it's rather fitting; the gloom of dusk perfectly suits the ominous figure of Shadow Milk Cookie as he makes his way through pitch-black forest surrounding him. His presence blends seamlessly with his surroundings, the stride of a predator slipping from shadow to shadow cast by the swaying trees overhead. Each step is accompanied by the tap of his cane, slow and methodical as he runs the day's events through his head.

The final day had passed too quickly, but they've prepared as best they can. Each piece is in place, each outcome's probability calculated. There is nothing left to do but trust in the strength of the kingdom's walls, in those he's left behind – in himself.

He has a part to play. He knows his lines, has to get them right. They're counting on him.

The Soul Jam at his chest pulses uneasily, a sickly glow amongst the black.

The forest is quiet all around him as he continues forward. The sky overhead is little more than a sea of black, broken only by stars whose faraway light can offer little for comfort. The wind is crisp and cold tonight, rustling through the leaves and sending an unbidden shiver through his dough. Perhaps he should have worn a jacket, or a scarf – there's no telling how long he'll be walking. The clearing should be nearby; yet in the all-consuming darkness, it's impossible to tell just how far he's gone. Perhaps he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere; perhaps he'd missed the clearing entirely.

A twig snaps nearby; the sound of footsteps approach.

Or, perhaps he's closer than he thought.

The form that emerges from the brush is familiar; the small sweep of her skirts, uncomfortably so. The low bow offered can only be in mockery, but he does not allow a sliver of his unhappiness to show; he only watches, expression impassive as the Cookie straightens up before him.

Cuccidati Cookie says nothing as she straightens up, hands folding primly before her. She says nothing; he offers nothing back. Silence stretches between them before she slowly inclines her head to the right and turns – a clear indication for him to follow.

Luring prey. That had always been her specialty, hadn't it?

There are a million questions that race in his mind, yet none of them slip past his sealed lips. Now is not the time for queries, for understanding the choices that have led her before him. Now is the time to obey her summons and match her slowly retreating footsteps, to hear the crunch of leaves underfoot as he leans heavily on his cane to follow after her.

The walk is spent in silence, broken only by the sounds of the forest around them and the rhythmic swish of Cuccidati Cookie's skirts. They don't travel far; it's only a few minutes before Cuccidati Cookie steps to the side, holding out a branch to allow him to pass. He gives her the briefest of glances before returning his gaze forward, stepping past her as the forest opens up into a newer, smaller clearing.

Dark Enchantress Cookie stands alone in the center, her imperious gaze roaming over him with an air of open amusement.

"Shadow Milk Cookie," she says in greeting. "You have kept me waiting. Bumbling around in the dark, are we?"

"Your servant showed me the way." There is no waver in his voice, no trace to betray the unsteadiness in his heart. "Let us not dwell upon it."

"Then let me cut to the point, my dear." Dark Enchantress Cookie's sharp gaze roams over him; he refuses to tense for her satisfaction. "I told you to come with Pure Vanilla Cookie's Soul Jam in hand. Yet, you come alone, wounded and defenseless against me, with nothing to offer in return. I wonder – what little plan have you come up with, hm?"

"There is no plan."

"Ah." Dark Enchantress Cookie's lips twitch with a wicked grin. "Such a weak lie from the Master of Deceit. I expected better from you." Her staff lifts, crimson light gathering at the crest of its skull. "What magics have you concocted? What tricky little schemes do you have at play? Tell me, so that I may crush them as pitifully as I will crush this kingdom."

"I came with what you asked for." His hand reaches up, clasping over his brooch. Beneath his palm, the Soul Jam hums eerily – reverberating against him with an icy feeling, a rejection of his next words. "An offering."

Dark Enchantress Cookie's eyes narrow; her staff lowers, planting itself back in the grass.

Slowly and methodically, the clasp of his brooch comes undone. The metal lands in his palm; after a single moment of steadying breath, he extends his hand in offering.

"You asked for a Soul Jam. In exchange for the Vanilla Kingdom's safety – I will offer my own."

Silence descends over the clearing. The wind itself stills around them; the trees stand motionless around them, the sea of black overhead dim and pallid against their crowning leaves. The new moon hangs high overhead, gazing down upon the scene unfolding before her.

What a sight it must be, to see Shadow Milk Cookie bending the knee in submission.

Dark Enchantress Cookie's lips twist wickedly; dark amusement glitters in her eyes as she looks him over, a sudden harsh laugh shattering the silence like glass.

"Oh, my dear. *This* is what you've been reduced to?"

A sharp burst of magic cracks through the air; in an instant he's thrown to the ground, a sharp gasp escaping as bursts of light swim in his vision. The Soul Jam flies from his grasp, skidding away as he doubles over, grasping at his chest with thin noises of pain. The grass crunches underfoot as Dark Enchantress Cookie approaches, the tap of her staff deafening alongside each mocking chuckle.

"How pitiful." She's stopped before him, looking down with an expression of deep contempt. "So wounded. So weak. I thought striking you down would be difficult, yet you lay here as little more than a husk. I expected more from you." She then bends; her hands clasp around the Soul Jam as she maintains eye contact through it all. When she straightens, it's with a smile – the brooch is fastened to her neckline, gleaming wickedly in the renewed glow of light from her staff.

"You have lost yourself, Beast of Deceit." Dark Enchantress Cookie's eyes gleam wickedly in the dark. "If I had wanted your Soul Jam, I would have taken it. You have always been at *my* mercy, just like the rest of your dear companions. You have nothing to bargain with, for you and all you have were mine from the start."

Dark Enchantress Cookie's staff points at him; in an instant, thorned crimson vines erupt from the ground, wrapping tightly around Shadow Milk Cookie's form; the barbs dig mercilessly into his dough as he doubles over with a pained cry. His arms are bound to his side, his cane dropped into the dirt as he struggles in her grasp; Dark Enchantress Cookie merely smiles down at him.

"Still," she remarks, observing him as if he were a roach beneath her boot. "Your pathetic little attempt amused me. As did the now-shattered wards you so carefully scattered about the forest." She bends, lowering herself face to face as she roughly grabs his chin in her hands, forcing him to look up. "I wonder – was that your real plan? To prevent me from summoning my army with such paltry magics? Or did you really, truly think I would take your little gift and leave in peace?" Her smile deepens. "How far you've fallen. You disgrace the very name of Beast Cookie."

Dark Enchantress Cookie stands; her staff raises as the thorns rip from the ground, holding Shadow Milk's limp form aloft. "No more stalling," she continues easily. "I've wasted enough time on you." At her back, rippling portals of inky black begin to coalesce; they expand, stretching towards the sky as silhouettes begin to form in the abyss. Dark Enchantress Cookie's smile twists into a wicked grin as the sounds of marching and clinking armor begin echoing all around them.

"Now then," she says sweetly, staff lowering to hover just inches from his face. "Would you like to see your dear, sweet Pure Vanilla Cookie?"

She does not wait for his reply, pays no heed to his renewed struggles – she only laughs, her staff pulsing with sharp crimson light.

Red paints itself across his vision – it is the last thing he sees before darkness swallows him whole.

Chapter 31

"I don't like this."

"I know."

A conversation held beneath the setting sun, upon the precipice of a night they cannot take back.

Pure Vanilla's face is pained, his gaze lowered to the floor and both hands firmly clasped around his staff. "You may never get it back."

"I will." Easy self-assurance. "It can work. It wouldn't be my plan if it couldn't."

"She'll be strong."

"She's already strong." A careless shrug of his shoulder. "And this isn't about one battle. You need to win a war. A temporary set-back is the only way she'll lower her guard."

Pure Vanilla's look of utter exhaustion is not one of defeat – rather, it is tight and strained, accompanied by repeated glances towards Shadow Milk.

"I don't like this," he says again.

"I know," Shadow Milk repeats effortlessly. "But it's all I've got. If you want to take the fight to her fair and square, we can still pull back – if I fail, that's going to be the outcome either way." A pause. "Do you think you can do it?"

Pure Vanilla shakes his head. "It's not me I'm concerned about."

"I'll be fine." Shadow Milk smiles. "And if I'm not-"

"Don't."

Shadow Milk's gaze trails off towards the sky. "It's not so bad," he says after a moment. "Not existing. And I'd come back eventually. Can't snuff out a spirit."

"I don't want you to die for me." Pure Vanilla's hands clench tightly around his staff. "All I've ever asked is for you to stay."

Firm, harsh words that Shadow Milk can't help soften at. "I don't want to die either," he replies gently. "But you need to play all your cards to have a shot at this. Besides," he adds, tossing his head proudly, "I happen to be exactly what you need for a winning hand."

Pure Vanilla's weariness is replaced by a flicker of amusement, if only temporarily. "Oh? And why's that?"

Shadow Milk grins, all teeth.

“Because Jokers are wild.”

--

It's strange how much the moonless sky reminds him of the Other Side.

It's not as if the moon's truly gone – not completely, anyway. Yet the gentle light that has followed him through millennia remains cloaked and shrouded, her eyes fluttered shut amidst a sea of twinkling stars. How long had he spent lingering in the depths of her void, hidden away amongst shadows? Time had been immaterial then, slipping away through his hands like grains of sand, meaningless and empty. The world had simply gone on without him, evolving and changing with only the remnants he'd left behind to remind them he too had existed.

Something about the stillness of night always brings out his poetic side. It had charmed his friends once, lent itself to the stories he'd tell around their dinners beneath the stars. The moon had graced them with her gentle light, as if she too had been listening in.

“Sire?”

A voice is calling to him. No time for idle thoughts, for dreams of days long past.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is needed.

There's a soldier standing at his side, arms snapped into a sharp salute. “Sire,” he repeats. “All battalions are accounted for. Standing by on your orders.”

A slow blink, then a nod as Pure Vanilla Cookie centers his thoughts. “Thank you,” he replies. His staff taps lightly on stone as he turns, casting a sweeping gaze across the parapet. The forest at the outskirts of the city walls looms large – yet it remains silent, shielding whatever lies within. Pure Vanilla scans the trees for a lingering moment, trying and failing to pick out any movement within its shadows.

The image of Shadow Milk Cookie smiling nervously back at him flickers in his mind, before being sharply dismissed.

“What of the others?” Pure Vanilla Cookie turns back towards the soldier, cape trailing behind him. “Have we had any news?”

The soldier shakes his head. “No, sire. Golden Cheese Cookie's shipment has yet to arrive. The Dark Cacao Kingdom has sent word ahead to our scouts, but its army is still on its way. We have not yet heard from the Hollyberry Kingdom.”

Pure Vanilla glances to the side. “What of White Lily Cookie? Did she receive the letter in time?”

The soldier's arm drops, quickly rummaging around in his bag before producing a scroll. He offers it out with a nod.

Pure Vanilla takes the scroll, unfurling it with a simple flick of his wrist. His eyes sharply scan the document, perusing each hastily-scribbled line carefully before he raises his gaze back to the soldier with a nod. “And the mages are sure they can replicate this?”

“Yes, sire.” The soldier drops into a bow. “Though they caution that they cannot hold the connection for long.”

“I see.” Impressive. It’s more than Shadow Milk Cookie had managed. “Tell the Parfaedian mages they have my blessing to proceed with the preparations, but do not begin the summon until Dark Enchantress Cookie arrives. If our time is limited, every moment must count.”

“Yes, sire,” the soldier repeats, taking back the proffered scroll before obediently retreating down the steps.

Pure Vanilla Cookie turns back towards the forest; another sweeping scan reveals nothing, not even a trace of another Cookie within its depths. The shadows conceal any hint of life, unbroken by even the faintest sliver of moonlight to illuminate the way. Darkness permeates the air like thick miasma, and even the torches flickering along the stone walls do little to dispel the perpetual gloom. It’s quiet – for a brief moment, Pure Vanilla Cookie is alone, left to his thoughts as his hand idly comes up to brush against his Soul Jam.

Its gentle hum of warmth is steadying, a welcome reprieve from the heaviness sitting upon his chest.

“Finally. I thought he’d never leave.”

Pure Vanilla Cookie glances right; where there had once been an empty parapet, now stands a new Cookie – one whose familiar face is split by a dazzling grin.

“Black Sapphire Cookie,” Pure Vanilla says in greeting, a polite tip of his head. “Has Shadow Milk Cookie been spotted?”

“Not yet.” The man takes a step forward, sweeping into a low bow. “Candy Apple Cookie is tailing him from a distance. Once the scene has concluded, she will get into place.”

“Good.” Pure Vanilla returns his gaze to the forest. “If something happens that Shadow Milk Cookie did not account for, I expect she’ll intervene.”

“Of course. You know how eager she is to please, even considering the... circumstances.”

He does know. He wishes it made him feel better in this moment.

“You should get into position too,” Pure Vanilla says after a moment. “Shadow Milk Cookie is counting on you. He trusts you to see this through.”

There’s a blink, as if Black Sapphire Cookie is surprised by his words. A strange beat of silence follows before the other simply utters: “Of course.” It’s followed by another low bow before the other fades into the shadows, disappearing into little more than a wisp of smoke.

Pure Vanilla Cookie rubs his hand over his Soul Jam once more, staring off up into the sky as the warmth pulses against his palm.

Everything has been set in place. All he can do now is trust in Shadow Milk Cookie's plan, trust in *him* to see it through. The fate of the kingdom, its people – his own, inextricably tied. If this kingdom falls, so too will he. Too many choices have been made, ones he cannot take back now.

A melancholy acceptance, but one he's made his peace with.

He should get into position himself.

The descent down the winding tower stairs takes far longer than he'd like; the staff is needed to steady him, each step taken slowly and carefully through gritted teeth. His limbs ache from the effort – he really is an old man, isn't he? How quickly the centuries can catch up on one when they're not looking, to say nothing of the battle wounds aching with each step.

When Pure Vanilla reaches the bottom, he's almost immediately flanked by three soldiers, all clamoring for his attention. He listens to their reports, then summarily dismisses them with new orders and areas to patrol. The pylons are active, the mages are standing by and the Paladins are at the forefront, ready for battle. It's these same troops that Pure Vanilla passes by as he crosses the threshold of the kingdom gates; they part all around him as he makes his way forward, bowing in waves before abruptly returning their attention forward.

Good. He needs them at the ready. At their best.

Pure Vanilla's staff thunks loudly against the wood of the drawbridge before he finally comes to a halt; the grass at his feet rustles in the wind as he cranes his neck, taking in the sights behind him.

Massive mechanical Golems, standing hundreds of feet high. Soldiers, halberds sharpened and poised, the gleam of their armor twinkling in the low light of the torches held high. The soft glow of magelight from the spells being woven all around them, silhouetted against the shimmering light of the barrier enshrining the kingdom's borders. Above all, a thousand eyes looking back, watching him with such trust, such faith that he will see them through.

A lot of responsibility on what feels like such fragile shoulders.

"Hey."

Pure Vanilla glances to the right; Black Raisin Cookie is approaching, a crow on her shoulder and three circling overhead. They do not call to one another, barely make any noise at all save for the soft flapping of wings high above.

Black Raisin Cookie raises her arm in greeting as she slows to a stop, giving him a once-over before offering a small smile. "You doing okay?"

"He'll be fine," Pure Vanilla Cookie replies instead; it's what he's telling himself, over and over again. He knows what she'd really been asking either way, and judging by her nod,

she'd expected as much. "Have they spotted anything?"

"Not yet." Black Raisin Cookie shakes her head. "I've sent Thompson and his flock to the north side of the forest, but-"

A shrieking caw shatters her next words.

Pure Vanilla's neck snaps up – a trio of crows are heading straight towards them, squawking loudly as their wings beat with fervent haste. All three of them make a beeline for Black Raisin Cookie, practically divebombing the woman as they circle and screech at her in a wild frenzy. There is no guesswork here, no need for Black Raisin's hurried attempts to translate – deep in the forest, Pure Vanilla can spy a beam of crimson light breaking through the treetops with a sickening glow. It grows and grows, peeling back the darkness as the soldiers gasp at the sight. There's a quake, a shudder that ripples through the land and shakes the very ground beneath Pure Vanilla's feet.

A chorus of howls and cries fills the air; the forest trembles, alive with shadows dancing between the crimson light. Wicked laughter. A shout of command.

Marching.

Footsteps, hundreds of them – loud and heavy, a cacophony of jeering and eager shouts accompanying them. The trees sway with the movement of the army approaching, drawing closer and closer as the soldiers at Pure Vanilla's back murmur in apprehension.

Pure Vanilla lifts a hand; they are silenced instantly. "Stand at the ready," he orders, tone steady and calm. "Do not engage until she strikes."

A chorus of shouts in agreement, orders barked by leaders as the sound of clanking armor fills the air. Pure Vanilla glances to Black Raisin Cookie, adding: "The mages are preparing for White Lily Cookie's arrival. Watch from the parapets, and command them once you spot her." She quickly nods, turning on her heels and hurrying out of sight. Satisfied, Pure Vanilla returns his gaze to the forest; he takes a single step forward, standing alone in the grassy field with the kingdom at his back.

He watches. He waits.

He does not have to wait long.

The silhouettes of Dark Enchantress Cookie's army fill the forest all around him; innumerable voices and thundering footsteps fill the air, accompanied by snarls and the clanging of metal as shadows shudder ever closer. A Cake Wolf is the first to be spotted, bounding from the forest as it throws back its head with a triumphant howl. Its cry echoes in his ears, joined by a barking chorus of its brethren that slink from the shadows moments later.

More and more forces step from the tree line into the open – Choco Roll Hoglets, Cake Wraiths and Werehounds all lumber forward, forming a definitive line in the front. Following after come the Wild Spice Cookies, torches held aloft in a sea of glinting horns, shimmering scales and glistening fangs. The Cherubim flutter above, twisting in lazy circles in the air with

their bows in hand as they giggle to one another. The Silent Salt archers are nowhere to be seen – but they're here. He knows they're here, can sense their movements in the shadows. They're not meant to be seen, but that makes them the most dangerous of all.

The army slows to a halt, several hundred meters away. There is silence, aside from rough mutterings and jeering remarks amongst the Cookies, an eerie sort of stillness held back as if by an unseen force. The Cake Monsters stand in place, shifting restlessly and gnashing their teeth – held back by an unseen force, yet just barely. A Cobra Tribe Cookie lashes his winding tail against the ground thrice; Pure Vanilla's gaze is drawn towards his scaled purple hide, the way he confidently cocks his head and grins wickedly over the heads of his peers.

A flash of crimson light pulls his attention away in an instant; a thick fog of smoke clears, revealing Dark Enchantress Cookie floating menacingly in its midst.

Magic flows from Pure Vanilla's hands, pooling in his staff as the reverberations tickle his palms. There's a light touch, a curious whisper in the back of his mind – he ignores it all, gaze set dead ahead. He can't afford any distractions, any slips in concentration.

The curtain has been raised, and his leading lady is sneering down at him in contempt.

Act One.

"Pure Vanilla Cookie." Dark Enchantress Cookie's voice carries like a clap of thunder. "Come to face my army head-on, have you? How pathetically *noble*."

"Dark Enchantress Cookie." Pure Vanilla's heartbeat thuds dangerously in his chest – not because she is here, but because she is alone. She can't have – no. She wouldn't have simply crumbled Shadow Milk Cookie. She couldn't have. Yet where-?

This isn't part of the plan. They can't go off-script this quickly.

Calm. Patience.

Trust him.

Pure Vanilla takes a steadying breath, gaze heavy as he lifts his chin defiantly. "Where is Shadow Milk Cookie?"

Dark Enchantress Cookie smiles coldly down at him, one hand coming up to brush over the Soul Jam brooch. "My, my. So full of questions."

"I question the Soul Jam you wear at your throat." Pure Vanilla points his staff up at her, eyes narrowing. "That Soul Jam belongs to Shadow Milk Cookie, and Shadow Milk Cookie alone. You have no right to bear it."

There's a laugh, sharp and wicked as Dark Enchantress Cookie's cloak flares with the motion. "Right? I have *every* right, my dear. Just as I have every right to crush your pathetic little kingdom with its power."

“You would claim a Beast Cookie’s authority?” Pure Vanilla takes a firm step forward. “By whose permission? The Soul Jam is their birthright, not yours.”

Dark Enchantress Cookie laughs again, just as loud and wicked as before; behind her, Pure Vanilla can see a few of the soldiers share curious looks with one another. “Piteous fool,” she sneers. “You would speak to me of birthrights? Mine is greater than you shall ever know.”

“I care not for your grand delusions,” Pure Vanilla replies coolly. “Nor your excuses. You have stolen from a Beast Cookie that which is not yours to wield.”

“Stolen?” Dark Enchantress Cookie’s lips twist with amusement. “My dear, it was a *gift*.”

“Lies,” Pure Vanilla dismisses, not giving her so much as a flinch. “Shadow Milk Cookie would never give up his Soul Jam. You have stolen it, and discarded him to hide your crimes.”

Improvisation. He prays it works.

Dark Enchantress Cookie leers down at him; then, in the back, a single Cherubim speaks.

“Hey – where *is* Master Shadow Milk Cookie?”

She’s a tiny little thing, twin pigtails done up in ribbons and a curious look on her face. She glances between her fellow Cookies, cocking her head. “Have any of you seen him?”

The other Cherubim exchange looks with soft murmurs of disagreements; even the Wild Spice Cookies shift in place, glancing around as if searching for the Beast in question.

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s sharp gaze shifts to her army – in an instant, there is silence, the group shirking back as one beneath her piercing glare. “I,” she snaps, slowly turning her head back towards Pure Vanilla Cookie, “wield that which is mine. If you doubt my words...” A smile, sharp and poisonous. “Why not ask him yourself?”

A sharp glow of crimson sparks off her staff; at Dark Enchantress Cookie’s side, a cage of thorns materializes from thin air. The figure of Shadow Milk Cookie lies within, slumped limply against the bars with his eyes closed.

An invisibility spell. She’d kept him close all along.

Pure Vanilla does not dare allow the relief flooding his chest to show on his face; his expression only hardens. “You reveal only your treachery, Dark Enchantress Cookie. You would cage a Beast Cookie, hold him as your prisoner? How are you any different from the Witches you claim to despise?”

“My prisoner?” Dark Enchantress Cookie touches the Soul Jam with a mock look of concern. “I am only keeping poor, exhausted Shadow Milk safe from *you*, Pure Vanilla Cookie. After all, I’m here to *help*.” Her nasty grin widens. “To take the Soul Jam that I have been so long denied.” She swivels around, cape flowing in the wind as she raises her arms high. “Is that not so, servants of the Beasts? We are here to rid this world of the Vanilla Kingdom, to decimate the enemies of your masters!”

The air is filled with cheers and jeers, the uncertainty dispelled in an instant. Weapons are held aloft, howls sing out in eerie chorus as the cake army bristles with malicious intent. The wolves take a step forward; Pure Vanilla swallows as he hears the soldiers behind him shift into motion – before he holds a hand up, halting their advance.

Too soon. He has to keep her talking, keep her gloating. The scene isn't finished yet.

“I do not stand against Shadow Milk Cookie,” Pure Vanilla declares loudly; the cake army’s raucous din quiets, all eyes on him again. “Nor do I control him.” Pure Vanilla’s staff raises, pointing directly at Dark Enchantress Cookie. “The Soul Jam does not belong to you. If my Soul Jam...” Pure Vanilla swallows. He has to get this right, has to nail the line perfectly.

Pure Vanilla squares his shoulders, standing tall as his staff slams into the dirt. “You bring an army to a battle that rests between you and I, Dark Enchantress Cookie. I have no fight with Shadow Milk Cookie. If my Soul Jam is to be borne by any other,” he declares. “It will be Shadow Milk Cookie alone. It is his right to claim, not yours.” Pure Vanilla’s hand comes up, brushing along the Soul Jam as it pulses beneath his palm. “Fight me for it if you must. I will surrender it to no one else but him.”

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s lips twist with cruel amusement. “Is that so?” Something glitters in her eyes, caught upon an idea that he can only pray he’s planted.

Her hand suddenly waves; the thorns surrounding Shadow Milk Cookie’s limp form slither away as the cage unwinds itself. He’s left suspended in mid-air, held aloft by the crimson glow of Dark Enchantress Cookie’s own magic – his eyes remain shut, yet his chest moves with slow, steady breaths.

He looks small, fragile, a hair’s breadth from crumbling away. Pure Vanilla’s breath catches in his throat, eyes searching frantically over the other’s form for any trace of harm, of cracks in the limp body held out tauntingly before him. He’s alive, eyes fluttering ever so slightly with each rattling breath – and that’s enough. For now, that’s enough.

The scene plays on.

Dark Enchantress Cookie points her staff down; slowly, Shadow Milk Cookie’s body begins floating towards Pure Vanilla Cookie. There’s a hush, an eerie stillness from both armies as they watch the descent; there’s not a word spoken until Shadow Milk Cookie’s silent form is left hovering inches away from Pure Vanilla’s head.

“Well?” Dark Enchantress Cookie remarks calmly. “Here he is. Shadow Milk Cookie, the *true* bearer of your Soul Jam.” Her brow lifts. “So – surrender it to him.”

Shadow Milk Cookie’s arm lifts slowly; his palm extends forward, even as his eyes remain firmly shut.

The urge to reach out and caress his face is strong – stronger than he’d like to admit. The worry gnawing away at his chest is difficult, almost impossible to ignore; yet just barely, he holds it back. Pure Vanilla Cookie takes a steadying breath, refocusing himself even as Dark Enchantress Cookie cackles above.

“My dear!” she crows. “What’s the matter? I thought you said it was *his*?” Her eyes flash dangerously. “Are you done with your pathetic charade? Then I suppose I’ll just *make* him take it-”

“No need.”

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s head recoils slightly, but Pure Vanilla Cookie pays it no mind. His hands come up to his brooch, methodically unfastening the clasp from his cloak. The soldiers behind him murmur worriedly – he cannot offer them any solace, not now. Dark Enchantress Cookie’s eyes are upon him, watching in close and nearly open disbelief as Pure Vanilla’s Soul Jam comes to rest in the palm of his hand.

No one speaks. Silence claims the land in full; even the wind is still all around them.

Pure Vanilla lifts his gaze; Shadow Milk Cookie’s eyes have opened now, unfocused and empty. How strange it is to see the reflection staring back at him within their depths, to watch as Pure Vanilla Cookie slowly places his Soul Jam in Shadow Milk’s open hand. Shadow Milk gives no sign of acknowledgement, nothing but a slow blink as a stray breeze rustles through his hair.

Time itself seems to still for a moment before Pure Vanilla Cookie’s hand lowers to clutch firmly around his staff. Quiet magic pulses within – even with the Soul Jam held by another, the connection is still there. He just needs to keep the magic flowing.

Just a little longer. That’s all they need.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” he says softly, eyes searching the other’s dulled expression, “does not serve anyone. His will is his alone.” Pure Vanilla’s gaze snaps up to Dark Enchantress Cookie. “You cannot have him.”

“*Shadow Milk Cookie*,” Dark Enchantress Cookie repeats back mockingly, “serves the darkness. And he is going to bring me that Soul Jam. Aren’t you, my dear?”

Pure Vanilla’s arm reaches out, latching onto Shadow Milk Cookie’s arm in an instant. “You don’t obey her,” he says firmly, lifting his chin to seek the other’s vacant gaze. “You are more than her puppet, Shadow Milk Cookie. Can you hear my voice?”

Dull, empty eyes stare back at him as Pure Vanilla’s heart thumps rapidly in his chest. There is no movement, not a single sound before Dark Enchantress Cookie’s nasty laugh echoes in his ears.

“Oh, please!” she sneers. “Really, was this your plan, Pure Vanilla Cookie? Did you think a pathetic little show of friendship would erase *my* will? What a pitiful display.” Her eyes narrow to slits. “Shadow Milk Cookie. *Bring me the Soul Jam.*”

Shadow Milk Cookie’s arm is abruptly pulled from Pure Vanilla’s grasp. Pure Vanilla takes a stumbling step forward, but his hand grasps at empty air - Shadow Milk Cookie’s body is already being pulled back. Dark, crimson magic drags him along like a limp marionette

through the air, haphazard and almost lifeless in his movements. The Soul Jam remains tightly clutched in his palm, shining through the dark with a brilliant glow.

“Ssstop!” The Cobra Tribe Cookie from before pushes to the front of the crowd, purple scales bristling with anger. “The Sssoul Jam belongs to our masterssss!” He lifts his hand in an accusing point, motioning to his peers. “The weakling ssspoke true! She *isss* controlling him!”

“SILENCE!” Dark Enchantress Cookie roars; her staff whips out, sending a shockwave of magic rippling through the crowd. The Cherubim spin wildly in the air, struggling to right themselves as the Wild Spice Cookies snarl in defiance – only to have the Cake Monsters turn, pointing their weapons straight back at their once-comrades. “Pathetic minions,” she sneers. “You exist to serve – do not question me again, or I will send you back to your masters in *pieces*.”

Murmurs of discontent rumble among the ranks; where once proud and excited wickedness had gleamed, an air of fury is growing with each angry stomp of their hooves. Even the Cherubim are exchanging nasty looks with one another, glaring at the Skelecake archers pointing arrows their way. The Cake Monsters bare their fangs, crowding the rest of the Cookies back as Dark Enchantress glares angrily at the crowd.

“Now then,” Dark Enchantress Cookie continues, returning her gaze forward. “Shadow Milk Cookie.” She extends a hand towards the limp form in front of her as her eyes gleam in delight. “Come here, pet.”

Shadow Milk Cookie floats obediently forward, hand slowly raising-

“Stop!” Pure Vanilla’s staff whips out, pulsing with magic as the air trembles all around them. “Shadow Milk Cookie, fight her! Do not let her control you!”

“Fool,” Dark Enchantress Cookie laughs. “Do you really think your pathetic little pleas will save him? Will save your kingdom or this wretched, broken world?” She reaches for the Soul Jam, a wicked grin upon her face. “This world will fall to *me*.”

Three things happen in quick succession.

A burst of white light fills the air, blinding in its radiance. Vines rip from the ground, spiraling up into the air with dizzying speed. They unfurl like snakes, poised to strike before snapping their writhing limbs shut around Dark Enchantress Cookie’s lower body – binding her arms in place as she screeches and struggles in shock.

Shadow Milk Cookie suddenly lunges forward; there’s barely time for Dark Enchantress Cookie to so much as meet his gaze before his hand clasps around the brooch, swiftly ripping it away from her cloak as torn fabric flies through the air.

In the same breath, Pure Vanilla Cookie raises his staff; there’s a flare of blue that follows, a barrier that encases Shadow Milk Cookie’s body whole and yanks him backwards through the sky.

Dark Enchantress Cookie screeches in rage; red light envelops her form, shattering the vines around her. Her staff whips forward, aimed straight at Shadow Milk Cookie's swiftly-retreating body; a blast of crimson magic crackles through the air, slamming into the shield with deadly force. Jagged cuts and fractures begin streaking down the shield with sickening speed; Pure Vanilla just barely manages to fling Shadow Milk's body out of harm's way before it shatters entirely. The blast ricochets off to shatter upon the ground, leaving a smoldering crater in its wake.

Shadow Milk Cookie pants as he clammers to his feet; both Soul Jams are held tight in his hands, glinting even as he sways unsteadily on his feet.

"Fools!" Dark Enchantress Cookie snarls; her staff crackles with lightning as she aims at Shadow Milk Cookie again. "You think you can defy me?!" Her spell fires, electricity arcing straight down – only to be deflected by another burst of white light. A flurry of vines erupt from the ground wrapping over Shadow Milk like a shield; Dark Enchantress Cookie's teeth gnash as she whips her gaze around, eyes narrowing as she finds her target.

The soft glow of white luminescence follows White Lily Cookie as she glides onto the battlefield, wings fluttering and staff raised high. The moonstone embedded in her chest glistens with new light, radiant and shining as she stares Dark Enchantress Cookie down. Her shade ripples with power, a beacon that draws a smile to Pure Vanilla's face, even if she's not sparing him a glance.

"You," Dark Enchantress Cookie hisses. "How are you-?"

"Your corruption of my previous vessel is no more." The glow around White Lily Cookie's form strengthens, blinding in its radiance. "I severed my connection to it the moment I felt the blight of your presence."

Dark Enchantress Cookie's mouth twists cruelly. "Too late. You think you can stop me now – you who exist as little more than a shade?"

"It is you who are the shade, Dark Enchantress Cookie." White Lily Cookie's staff lifts above her head, the petals flaring with brilliant light against the night sky. "I will not allow you to harm the people of this land."

"Hah!" Dark Enchantress Cookie snaps. "You think your pitiful illusions can stand against the might of my power? My *army*?" Her head whips back as she turns towards her legions, raising her arms high into the sky. "Servants of Darkness! Listen, and obey!" She points to the castle, a dark sneer upon her lips. "Lay waste to our enemies! Crumble all who stand in your way!"

The Cake Monsters howl in approval, throwing back their heads and brandishing their weapons eagerly. The Cream Wolves gallop across the battlefield as Hoglets and Skelecake grunts follow after; it's a blur, a stampede of movement headed straight towards the castle walls. Pure Vanilla Cookie's grasp tightens on his staff; the magic within pulses, responding to his tension – yet it remains, strong and unbroken. The whispers in his ear grow curious, pushing at his mind even as he lifts a steady hand.

“Soldiers!” he orders. “To the front!”

There’s a flurry of shouts, the clattering of armor as Cookies rush past him as one; shields come up, forming a wall all around him as the first line of Paladins braces at the front. The Cake Monsters push forward, claws extended as they lunge towards the soldiers-

Only to be swept away by an eruption of vines, tossing them high into the air in a chorus of screeching.

Some make it through – fangs and swords clatter against shields as the sounds of fighting erupt across the battlefield. Snarls and screams echo in Pure Vanilla’s ears as he grips tightly at his staff; White Lily Cookie’s magic shines brilliantly as wave after wave is tossed away, grabbed and crushed to pieces beneath her might as the soldiers battle on all around her. He needs to help – but can’t, can’t break his concentration for a moment, even as a Cream Wolf’s snout snaps inches away before being beaten back by a mace.

Dark Enchantress Cookie looms large over the battle; yet far behind her, the Wild Spice Cookies and Cherubim stand motionless at the forest’s edge. Their gazes are steady, visible discontent in their expressions as they glance between one another – holding back despite her orders. Yet as each Cake Monster crumbles beneath the slash of a sword or the snap of a vine, their hesitation only seems to grow. Pure Vanilla can spot several of the Cherubim flutter backwards, murmuring amongst the others – the one done up in twin pigtails is flitting between them all, whispering in their ears.

It doesn’t take long for Dark Enchantress Cookie to notice – as more and more of her monsters fall, her palpable rage builds in the pinch of her brow. She whips back around, pointing her staff down at the remnants of her army. “Enough stalling! I did not bring you here to watch!” Her teeth gnash as she surveys them with open distaste. “Miserable vermin! Are your minds so simple that you cannot even obey?!”

“We do not ssserve you.”

The voice comes from the Cobra Tribe Cookie that had spoken earlier; his purple scales shimmer in the dim torchlight as he raises himself high above the others. His slitted pupils narrow as he hisses: “We ssserve our Masssters. And *you* have ssstolen from them.”

“Yeah!” The pigtailed Cherubim is swooping in above the crowd, gesturing to her sisters excitedly. “We don’t have to listen to you! The Beast Cookies deserve the Soul Jam, not you! And we’re not going to help you take it!”

There’s a chorus of agreement from the crowd, some enthusiastic, some more hesitant as Dark Enchantress Cookie sweeps her staff out with a poisonous glare.

“Fools!” she hisses. “You think the Beast Cookies will save you from my glorious dawn? You, and your pathetic kin will be erased – all of them!”

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s attention snaps back; her Cake Monsters are still battling on, but the Vanillian army is standing strong. More and more of her minions are being whittled away

– and it is this very realization that makes both Pure Vanilla and Dark Enchantress Cookie’s eyes narrow.

“Very well,” she snaps; her gaze comes to rest on Pure Vanilla, watching him with something dark gleaming in her eyes. “If the Beast Cookies’ minions will not serve as my weapon...”

The curve of her mouth suddenly twists in a sharp, cruel grin. “Then I shall wield a Beast Cookie itself.”

Act Two.

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s staff points at the shield of vines that encases Shadow Milk within; they wither away in an instant, revealing Shadow Milk standing tall beneath. His expression is steady, filled with resolve as he glares up at her with both Soul Jams in hand. Their power glints promisingly in his palms, a beacon that shines even as Dark Enchantress Cookie looms menacingly above.

“Shadow Milk Cookie,” Dark Enchantress Cookie commands, voice echoing with power. “*Come.*”

Shadow Milk Cookie stands motionless, gaze steady upon her. The wind whistles all around them, the grass swaying idly at his feet.

There’s a scowl; Dark Enchantress Cookie’s staff glows with power as her gaze narrows. “Shadow Milk Cookie,” she orders, another thrum of magic magnifying her voice. “*Bring me the Soul Jams.*”

Shadow Milk’s form glows with crimson light; yet in an instant, it’s dispelled with an audible snap. Shadow Milk continues to stand there, watching her with an expression of growing amusement as he folds his arms across his chest. The Soul Jams twinkle in his palms; Pure Vanilla watches Dark Enchantress Cookie glower at the sight.

“You-” she snarls. “The Soul Jams-”

“These?” Shadow Milk Cookie holds the Soul Jams aloft, waving them about in open mockery. “You want these?”

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s staff burns with light; she points it straight at him as wicked crimson lightning envelops Shadow Milk Cookie’s body – only for it too to dissipate moments later, with Shadow Milk Cookie standing unscathed at the center. He tilts his head, brushing off the top of his shoulder as if for effect, before returning his gaze to her. “What?” he asks easily. “No order this time?”

“Impossible,” Dark Enchantress Cookie breathes. “You cannot defy me. Your dough is mine.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Shadow Milk spreads his hands in a lazy shrug, eyes twinkling with mirth. “Shadow Milk Cookie doesn’t obey *anyone.*” His grin sharpens. “Pure Vanilla Cookie

was kind enough to lend me more than a little of his own Soul Jam's power. I'm afraid your little tricks won't work on me anymore."

"Impossible," Dark Enchantress Cookie repeats; there's a growing rage, a fury visibly building in her expression. "You cannot – you are mine! Your *dough* is mine! You cannot resist - you *have* to obey!"

"DOES HE NOW?"

A booming voice shatters the sky; Dark Enchantress Cookie's eyes widen, her head snapping upwards.

Pure Vanilla exhales slowly; the connection sings in his jam as he allows his magic to finally flow outwards without restraint. Shadows pulsate out from his staff, spiraling upwards to burst overhead as four pairs of shining eyes blink into view amongst the starry sky. Each closes, then opens; in their depths, images shimmer to life. Reflections of figures emerge from the glassy haze, their narrowed, slitted pupils sharpening into view as four familiar faces fill the screens.

Three, at least. Silent Salt's helmet remains donned, impenetrable as always, but all eyes are centered down on Dark Enchantress Cookie's stare of disbelief.

"How amusing!" Burning Spice Cookie's voice rumbles like thunder, his massive visage leering down from his mirror. "And just when I was beginning to grow bored with these little gnats in my ear!"

A yawn echoes from his side; Eternal Sugar Cookie bats her long eyelashes, leaning closer as her idle, mountainous gaze scans across the field. "My, my," she remarks, looking between. "Seems the story's a bit different than what we were told..." Her head turns slightly as she looks upon Pure Vanilla Cookie. "Playing games again?"

Shadow Milk Cookie clears his throat, drawing her attention - he grins ear to ear before sweeping into a flourishing bow. "Oh, you know me. What's a playwright without an audience?"

"HAH!" Burning Spice Cookie barks; he thumps his axe on the ground, the reverberation echoing through the land even here. "You always bring me something new! How refreshing!" Burning Spice Cookie's eyes narrow, a dark grin on his face. "And with the stench of treachery, no less."

Dark Enchantress Cookie gawks between them, her eyes wide with disbelief as the mirrored eyes circle her, pressing closer. She sputters, both hands tight around her staff as each Beast looks her over with open disdain. "You-" she snaps, voice thin and tight. "What is this?! What have you done?!"

"Now, now," Eternal Sugar Cookie hums, her wings fluttering delicately behind her. "I think the question is, what have you done, Dark Enchantress Cookie? Our dear Shadow Milk

Cookie seems to be playing tricks on you.”

“I...” Dark Enchantress Cookie swallows, before a forced grin appears on her face. “Eternal Sugar Cookie. There seems to be a misunderstanding. I am only here to free Shadow Milk Cookie from the Ancient’s wretched control.”

Eternal Sugar Cookie’s gaze sweeps between Pure Vanilla Cookie and Shadow Milk, before a sweet smile graces her delicate face. “Ah... to tell lies before the Master of Deceit. What a funny little game you’ve made, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Enough talk!” Burning Spice Cookie crows, hefting his axe high. “I tire of this prattle! Let us dispose of her and be done with it!”

Eternal Sugar Cookie ignores him entirely, folding her hands beneath her chin as she glances to the side. “And where have you been, Mystic Flour Cookie? It’s been ages. My garden is so lonely without you.”

“I was deep within my meditation.” Mystic Flour Cookie replies; her own eyes are shut, barely giving them so much as a glance. “This... conveyance has disturbed it.”

There’s a noncommittal hum before Eternal Sugar Cookie looks to her left; Silent Salt’s motionless form stands imposingly in view, but there’s no sign of movement from the other – just a considering tilt, as if observing all below.

Eternal Sugar Cookie returns her attention forward. “Well, it seems we’ve all had our say. Anything to add, my dear...” Her gaze roams over Shadow Milk’s form, twinkling with delight. “... Shadow Milk Cookie?”

“Oh, you know.” Shadow Milk Cookie flutters his lashes, offering her a wide grin. “Just putting on a good show! Enjoying pulling the rug on our dear once-friend Dark Enchantress Cookie. Though, you might call off your goons, if it’s not too much trouble.” He holds up both Soul Jams, offering the four a wink. “As you can see, Shadow Milk Cookie has things well in hand, and doesn’t like his stage mucked up before he’s done with it.”

“Silly little thing.” Eternal Sugar Cookie flutters her lashes. “Cherubim – return to my garden.”

“Wild Spice Cookies!” Burning Spice Cookie roars, “Destroy-!”

“No.”

Burning Spice frowns. “But-”

“You must learn to leave Shadow Milk Cookie’s playthings alone. Look.” Eternal Sugar Cookie waves a hand towards the Vanillian army. “He’s got them all lined up, in cute little outfits too. You know how he gets when we touch his things.”

“Not them.” Burning Spice Cookie points to the remaining Cake Monsters, who immediately shrink back under his gaze. “Those!”

“Oh, you.” Eternal Sugar Cookie smiles. “Go ahead.”

Burning Spice Cookie draws himself up, sharp grin widening as he bellows: “Wild Spice Cookies! Destroy!”

The battlefield is instantly alive with movement; the Wild Spice Cookies surge forward in a frenzy, weapons drawn and cheers erupting among deafening cries. They clash into the Cake Monsters, from behind teeth and fangs meeting steel and sword as shouts and howls of fury and fervor echo all around. Cream Wolves sink their teeth into furred hides; Skelecake archers are struck down in a flurry of blows, or crushed to pieces beneath the strong whip of a snake tail. Destruction reigns down on the field all around them, as Dark Enchantress Cookie stares down in disbelief.

The Cherubim are fleeing as quickly as they can, dodging the trees and flying bits of cream and dough; Pure Vanilla Cookie can only stare in disbelief at the sight, can hear his own soldiers draw back and murmur in wonder at the massacre taking place across from them.

An unplanned shift in the script, but – salvageable, at least.

“*You.*”

Dark Enchantress Cookie’s voice cuts through the din, carrying over the sounds of battle with palpable fury. Her narrowed gaze is on Pure Vanilla Cookie alone, her staff sparking dangerously in her hands. “You miserable little pest,” she hisses. “At every moment of my triumph, you and your wretched, crumbling self stands in my way!”

“I will always defy you, Dark Enchantress Cookie.” Pure Vanilla lifts his head, eyes gleaming with defiance. “Myself, my people, and my kingdom will stop you at every turn.” A grin, sharp and small. “Really. Did you think you’d ever outwit the Master of Deceit? Seems you’re the pathetic one here.”

Dark Enchantress Cookie snarls; her staff scythes through the air as an enormous crimson beam of magic erupts from its tip. It streaks downwards, aiming straight for him – Pure Vanilla Cookie throws up his staff, a barrier whipped up around him as the blast smashes into it with unrelenting force. Jagged cracks are already appearing as he grits his teeth, the sheer power pushing him back as magic crackles and singes the air all around him.

She’s strong – too strong. His grasp is weakening, splinters flying off as the dark magic forces itself closer and closer-

A burst of white envelops him, cloaking itself over the barrier; Pure Vanilla doesn’t have to look to feel White Lily Cookie’s presence, her own magic entwining to strengthen his spell. Dark Enchantress Cookie lets out a shriek of fury overhead; the beam grows, larger and stronger, smashing furiously against his struggling shield as Pure Vanilla groans in pain, driven to one knee by its sheer force. There’s shouting, the dim realization that Shadow Milk Cookie’s voice is calling from across the field; through the sparks of light, Pure Vanilla can just barely make out the other running straight towards him.

No. He has no weapon. If he comes – if he gets in the way-

Dark Enchantress Cookie's eyes find him too quickly, narrow in on Shadow Milk's form hurrying across the grass. Pure Vanilla cries out in desperation, but her attention's already shifting, her head already whipping towards him with a snarl of open rage. The beam dissipates only for a moment as she raises her staff high, a wicked sneer on her face as she strikes her staff forward-

An arrow pierces her chest.

Dark Enchantress Cookie gasps; the air catches in Pure Vanilla's throat in the same breath. He stares up as she doubles over; her hands grasp mindlessly at her chest, smearing in the fresh jam. A familiar black-tipped arrow is protruding from her dough, cut straight through to embed itself just below her neck.

The Silent Salt archers' aim has ever been true.

"Hah!" Burning Spice Cookie laughs. "Well, well! Look who's joining in on the fun!"

Silent Salt Cookie says nothing; there is no sign of acknowledgement, or even satisfaction. A gauntleted hand simply raises – in an instant the connection snaps, and all four mirrored eyes dissipate from existence.

The sky is empty, save for the huddled figure of Dark Enchantress Cookie gasping in the sea of black.

There's a wet gurgle, another strained sound as Dark Enchantress Cookie slumps over; hate burns in her eyes, her magic wavering around her as it pulses, then shudders weakly at her call. She fixes her seething snarl on Pure Vanilla Cookie, hand trembling around her staff as she croaks:

"I will... crumble... this world..." Her eyes flash. "All of you...!"

Her staff tumbles from her hands; as it falls, a slim portal is ripped open along the length of its horns, torn straight through reality. Dark Enchantress Cookie's body goes fully limp – she falls forward, disappearing into the portal with an anguished, furious cry.

A single breath later and the portal snaps shut, vanishing from sight as quickly as it had come.

Finale.

The sounds of fighting still echo across the field; the Wild Spice Cookies are still hard at work, tearing into the Cake Monsters that have begun fleeing back into the forest. They chase down their prey with whoops and hollers, stampeding after the stragglers and stomping and crushing every stray in their path. They pay no mind to the Vanillian soldiers across the way, already disappearing back the way they'd come and leaving only the ringing cries of their destruction echoing in their wake.

After a faint moment of silence settles in, a deafening cheer rises up to fill it; the soldiers yell and cry in jubilation, shields clanging together as celebration rings out over the castle walls.

The cries of exuberance are deafening, practically shaking the ground that Pure Vanilla Cookie slowly slumps down upon.

It's incredible how utterly exhausted he feels. He'd done nothing, barely cast any spells at all – and yet, every piece of his dough feels brittle to the touch, as if he might crumble away simply from breathing.

They'd won. Without a spot of Vanillian jam spilled, without a single crumbled friend at his feet – he'd won.

That didn't seem right.

Hadn't he been meant to perish here? He'd expected something, anything to go wrong – at least, more wrong than it had. Sure, there'd been some script deviations, but he'd been braced for the worst. For his end, to give up his life, to do anything to protect-

“Are you alright?”

Pure Vanilla's head lifts, to see a familiar face smiling down at him. A hand is being offered up; he takes it without a second thought, allows himself to be pulled to his feet without a sliver of resistance.

Shadow Milk Cookie gazes fondly back at him, hand still holding on tight to his own. “You did wonderfully,” he says softly.

“Me?” Pure Vanilla laughs, disbelief overriding all else. “You – you were incredible! And here I was, worried about your acting skills!”

“It was a little difficult.” Shadow Milk Cookie's cheeks flush lightly. “I pretended to be unconscious so she wouldn't talk to me. I didn't want to ruin anything.”

“You were amazing.” Pure Vanilla's hands reach up, cupping the uninjured side of Shadow Milk's cheek. “Look at you, learning how to improv. It brings a tear to my beautiful eyes.”

Shadow Milk laughs; his own hand raises, gently covering Pure Vanilla's own upon his cheek. “I'm glad.” His words are calm, touched by new fatigue even with the smile upon his face. “I'm – so glad. I could not have done this without you. To vanquish such a threat, with only-”

“Hey.” Pure Vanilla interrupts, leaning in closer with a sly smile tugging at his lips. “Is it wrong if I want to kiss you like this?”

“Yes,” Shadow Milk laughs, gently pulling his head away. “Please don't.”

“Aw,” Pure Vanilla coos, tilting his head for a better angle. “But, why not?”

“Because you have an audience.”

Black Raisin Cookie's voice cuts in, laced with dry amusement; Pure Vanilla lifts his head, watching as she approaches with a squad of soldiers at her back. Her crows circle overhead,

crowing as if in victory before alighting atop her head and shoulders as she comes to a stop. She places her hand on her hip, looking the pair of them over before shaking her head. “Gotta say – you impressed me. Didn’t think we were getting out of this so easily.”

“Oh, please,” Pure Vanilla drawls, rolling his eyes. “It was child’s play. Seriously, Dark Enchantress Cookie’s ego is practically bigger than-”

“Yours?”

Pure Vanilla scowls. “That’s no way to talk to your king.”

“Gross.” Black Raisin Cookie smiles at him. “Can you two knock it off? This is weirding me out.”

“Perhaps,” Shadow Milk Cookie cuts in, “we should continue this in privacy. I do not think it wise to discuss such things out here.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Black Raisin Cookie waves a dismissive hand. “Go change.” She motions to the celebrations and cheering soldiers at their back, to say nothing of the fireworks the mages seem to be setting off overhead. “You two dip out. I don’t think you’ll be missed for a few moments.”

Pure Vanilla opens his mouth, ready to nod – before he spies another figure standing off in the distance.

White Lily Cookie’s apparition stands patiently at the castle walls, her calm gaze resting upon them both. When their eyes meet, she inclines her head, watching him for a few moments with an appraising look.

After a few moments, he lowers his head – a silent show of thanks, the least she is owed.

When he finally raises his gaze once more, White Lily Cookie is gone – and his attention is being pulled back by a touch to his arm.

“Come.” Shadow Milk Cookie is pressing the Soul Jam into Pure Vanilla’s palm. “Let’s slip away, shall we? We can return, after...”

“Right.” Pure Vanilla blinks, shaking his head sharply to clear his thoughts. “Uh. Yes. Let’s...” He absently attaches the brooch back to his chest, pinning it in place before brushing a hand against its metal.

Cold and comforting, just like how he remembered.

A portal to and from Pure Vanilla’s bedroom is a hat trick at this point, the journey short and small enough for even the other to bear. It’s not until they’re alone that his shoulders finally slump, that he can physically shake off the fatigue eating into him with a long, heavy sigh. “My head hurts,” he sighs, massaging at his temple. “It’s so exhausting being you, you know that?”

“I know.” Shadow Milk Cookie’s smile is dazzling in its sincerity. “May I be dispelled now, please?”

“Hm.” A quick glance-over. “I dunno. You’re pretty handsome as you are. You’re sure?”

“I am the handsomest, cleverest Cookie in all of Earthbread.” The other’s smile deepens. “But I’d like to kiss you as myself.”

Oo. Incentive.

A quick summon of his cane to his palm before a whimsical flourish, and then he’s leaning in to tap both their foreheads in quick succession. The illusions melt away, pooling as wisps of shadows upon the floor as Pure Vanilla closes his eyes-

When they open again, it is Shadow Milk Cookie blinking in rapid succession, slipped back into place as easily as a glove. He runs a hand over his restored face, feeling along the persistent cracks before glancing up - then smiles to see Pure Vanilla’s gentle eyes gazing back at him.

“Changed my mind,” Shadow Milk says after a moment. “You’re much handsomer like this.”

“I don’t know about that,” Pure Vanilla hums; he takes a step forward, hand already rising in familiar motion to brush against Shadow Milk’s cheek. “But I’m glad to be me again.”

“It would have been fun,” Shadow Milk supplies, “kissing you like that.”

Pure Vanilla pulls a face, even if his eyes still glimmer with amusement. “It would have been... strange. I don’t think I could kiss myself.”

“It’s easy.” Shadow Milk’s hands come to rest on Pure Vanilla’s hips, tugging him closer. “I kiss you all the time.”

There’s a chuckle as Pure Vanilla lowers his head, brushing their foreheads together. “All the time, hm?”

“Well...” Shadow Milk squeezes the other’s hips gently. “I’m a bit out of practice. Maybe you could help?”

“I could.” Pure Vanilla’s other hand rises; both frame Shadow Milk’s face perfectly, gently pulling him closer. “Will it suffice?”

“Suffice for what?”

“As thanks.” Pure Vanilla presses a kiss to his cheek before softly continuing: “As a show of gratitude. For my kingdom. My people. That you are still here, with me.”

“Hah!” Shadow Milk swallows thickly, emotion building in his chest. “You’re the one who was in real danger.”

“And I’ll thank you for that too.” Pure Vanilla’s hand brushes back the hair from Shadow Milk’s face. “For sparing me the pain of seeing you like that. For trusting me.”

“I trust you.” Shadow Milk leans into the touch, eyes fluttering. “Of course I trust you. I mean,” he continues abruptly, “it’s not really about *my* trust. This was *your* kingdom. Sure, it was *my* plan, but way more was at risk for you – I mean, sure, I might’ve been controlled or crumbled if she’d figured it out, but you could have taken me. I know you didn’t *want* to, but I mean, hey, being a spirit isn’t the worst thing in the world, though she probably could have destroyed that too, so-”

“Shadow Milk Cookie?” Pure Vanilla interrupts gently.

There’s a blink; Shadow Milk grins apologetically. “Sorry. Yes?”

Pure Vanilla’s smile is so soft, eyes twin pools of fondness. “I love you.”

Shadow Milk’s heart flutters before he replies: “I love you too.”

Another smile, touched by grace itself, before Pure Vanilla is pulling him in for a kiss.

The kiss is gentle, yet lingers far too long to be called chaste. When Shadow Milk presses closer, fatigue giving way to greedy impulse, Pure Vanilla holds him tight, squeezes him against his chest in an open show of longing. Even when they part, breathing heavily with lips scarcely apart, Shadow Milk can feel the other’s heartbeat thudding against him in open want. Shadow Milk licks his lips, brushing them invitingly against Pure Vanilla’s own – just as the other’s about to lean in again, Shadow Milk murmurs:

“I’ll stay with you.”

Perhaps it’s silly to finally say, this far down the line; yet Pure Vanilla shudders at his words, drawing him in close. There’s another kiss, pressed firmly, desperately to the side of Shadow Milk’s cheek and an exhale tickling in Shadow Milk’s ear. “Thank you,” Pure Vanilla whispers back; Shadow Milk can only smile as Pure Vanilla’s hands grasp his chin, pulling him back into another breathless kiss.

As their hands clutch at one another, as stumbling steps lead them towards the bed, Shadow Milk can’t help but smile against Pure Vanilla’s lips. Even as he’s dragged downwards, he can’t fight the bubble of laughter from escaping his chest or how his good arm instinctively loops around Pure Vanilla’s neck. The scent of vanilla fills his lungs as Shadow Milk is pressed down into familiar sheets; kiss after kiss is trailed down his throat as Shadow Milk’s eyes flutter, pleasure and warmth intertwining in a heady mix. His head feels fuzzy, pleasingly so – even with Pure Vanilla’s hands smoothing over his waist, stomach, hips, Shadow Milk can’t help but feel dreamily content as he lets out a small, happy sigh.

Of course he’ll stay. He’d be nowhere else but here, wrapped in Pure Vanilla’s arms until the last sun has set, until eternity itself is nothing but a distant memory. He’ll stay here, exactly how he likes, exactly how he wants, because Shadow Milk Cookie has won.

Not perfectly, not forever – but today, he has won.

Pure Vanilla's kisses pull him closer; there's a brush against Shadow Milk's brooch by Pure Vanilla's own, a warming sensation that leaves shudders in its wake. Shadow Milk's smile deepens as he nuzzles upwards, savoring the warmth thrumming in his chest.

Distantly, as a hand smooths down his side, Shadow Milk notes he can feel the Soul Jam pulsing happily at his throat.

How strange.

It's humming again.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Can you tell us another story?”

The query is soft and tentative, causing Shadow Milk to raise his eyes from the book in hand. There’s a small girl at his feet; more precisely, standing below where Shadow Milk’s legs dangle over the edge of the stage. Behind him he can hear the clamor of children, loudly dragging props across the wood and seemingly mid-argument about something to do with the curtains. Shadow Milk pays the noise no mind, sipping lightly at his mug of tea as he sets the book down and gives the girl another once-over.

He doesn’t mind the interruption. Shadow Milk’s always up for a good book, but this so-called Jammy Cake Cookie focuses a bit too much on the bedroom scenes for his liking.

Shadow Milk’s gaze rests comfortably on the small child fidgeting before him; she’s not familiar to him, but that’s nothing new. Biscocho and Rosquillo Cookie are always dragging their friends over to visit him, eagerly showing him off to anyone willing to listen. Shadow Milk takes the attention in stride – usually they’re quite loud and noisy, but this one seems shy, a flush to her face as she avoids his eye contact.

“Another story, hm?” Shadow Milk glances behind him; Rosquillo is arguing with another boy, tugging back and forth on a large cardboard sheep. Shadow Milk turns his gaze back to the girl, perking a brow. “I suppose we have a little bit of time. My date’s late anyway.”

She smiles brightly, placing her hands on the stage’s edge as she begins hauling herself up; while she struggles upwards, Shadow Milk tilts his head as he idly scans the Crow’s Nest Inn’s courtyard.

It’s remarkable what they’ve done with the place in his absence; where there had once been empty cobblestones and shattered bits of glass now sits an abundance of chairs and benches, all facing the hand-built stage. The dry fountain filled with dead leaves now overflows with pristine, clear milk, bubbling away for crows and Cookies alike to sip from. Even the dim lighting from the streetlamps has been accentuated with fairy lights strung around the edges of the roofs, twinkling happily even in the rays of the setting sun.

Yet, for all the pleasant sights before him, there’s still no Pure Vanilla Cookie stepping out from the alleyway. It’s already well past dinner time as it is.

Typical. Always keeping Shadow Milk waiting.

The girl’s finally hoisted herself up, settling next to Shadow Milk and smoothing out her skirts. Shadow Milk takes a final sip from his mug, setting it down next to the book before folding his hands in his lap. “What’s your name?” he queries.

The girl tugs at her hair shyly. “Paborita Cookie.”

“Well then,” Shadow Milk continues, “Paborita Cookie. What sort of story would you like?”

She hums, toying with the ends of her curly locks. “Um...” Her cheeks flush pinker.

“Maybe... a love story?”

Shadow Milk chuckles; this seems to embarrass her further as she ducks her head and averts her eyes. “Hey, don’t worry!” he says with a smile. “I’ve got love stories. Tons of them!” A pause. “A few, anyway.” Shadow Milk folds one leg over the other, thinking to himself for a moment. “Hm... how about...” Shadow Milk clicks his tongue. “The story of the Cookie who wasn’t a Cookie.”

Paborita Cookie perks up, her interest instantly piqued. “How can a Cookie not be a Cookie?”

“Well, he was.” Shadow Milk shrugs one shoulder. “But he also wasn’t.”

The girl scoots closer, head tilted curiously.

“You see,” Shadow Milk begins, “this Cookie wasn’t made like you. He was crafted into the world for a singular purpose, blessed with infinite knowledge and the duty to bestow it upon all creation. He was expected to be a Fount of Knowledge, a beacon to guide other Cookies around him. Yet despite his mantle of leadership, he’d never truly lived their lives.”

“What do you mean?” Paborita Cookie inquires curiously.

“Well, others came to him with questions, and he provided the answers. That was his whole life! There’d never really been any need for anything else. He was meant to live forever, existing just as he was – there was no place for him out in the fields or spending time down in the taverns.”

“Sounds lonely.”

“It could be,” Shadow Milk remarks. “But he wasn’t alone. Four others shouldered those same burdens alongside him, made to help other Cookies in different ways. And for a time, they were happy. But as eternity dragged on, one by one, his friends cast off their duties. They embraced total freedom and rejected the Cookies that depended on them. And they asked him to join them.”

Paborita Cookie’s eyes go wide. “Did he?”

“He did,” Shadow Milk affirms. “Instead of a Fount, he became a Beast. A creature that thrived off misery and chaos, who toyed with the lives of mortals as if they were mere puppets on his strings. He delighted in such a change, in the exhilaration of discarding a miserable existence in favor of unbridled delights. He was not a simple Cookie like the gnats that fled before him – he was their better, a higher being whose power was his alone to wield as he’d liked.”

“What happened?”

“Well,” Shadow Milk says with a sigh, “those that created him did not agree. They struck him down and imprisoned him, along with the others, to serve out the rest of their existences alone and in darkness.”

“But...” Paborita Cookie frowns. “I thought he lived forever.”

“Correct.”

“So,” Paborita Cookie continues, brow furrowing, “he’s just alone forever? What if he changed his mind? That’s not fair.”

“Maybe it’s not,” Shadow Milk sighs. “But he hurt a lot of people. It’s hard to say what’s fair when he lived on as others perished at his hands.”

“Is he still there now?” Paborita Cookie asks. “Still trapped forever?”

“He’s not,” Shadow Milk replies, shaking his head. “How could he be? I told you it’s a love story.”

“Oh, good.” Paborita Cookie smiles. “Did someone come free him?”

“In... a way,” Shadow Milk says carefully. “He escaped his prison, fled back to his home far, far away from where other Cookies couldn’t find him. He built up high towers to plot his revenge in – for you see, he was still a Beast. Still angry, still wanting to take his hurt out on the world.”

“Does he still?”

“Well...” Shadow Milk drawls, shrugging one shoulder. “That’s a bit more complicated, I think. But, during his plotting, he did encounter a new Cookie – a Cookie that was unlike any other Cookie he’d met before.”

Paborita Cookie’s eyes go wide. “Who?”

“A king,” Shadow Milk replies with a smile. “A handsome, wonderful king.”

“Oh?” A new voice cuts through the air, tinged with amusement. “And how handsome was he?”

Shadow Milk scowls as his head turns; the tap of Pure Vanilla Cookie’s staff announces his presence as he steps into view from the alley. There’s a satisfied smile on his face, one that Shadow Milk meets by sticking out his tongue and rolling his eyes. “Ugh. Of course you’d show up *now*.”

“My apologies,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “The meeting ran long, and Clotted Cream Cookie wanted a word after.”

Of course it was Clotted Cream Cookie.

“You’re late,” Shadow Milk sniffs. “I’ve been starving away from neglect because of you.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” Pure Vanilla’s smile is annoyingly persistent as he crosses the courtyard, coming to a stop just before the stage. “Did you want to finish your story first?”

“No,” Shadow Milk decides. “Not with you here.”

“But I want to hear the rest!” Paborita Cookie protests. “We just got to the good part! Does he fall in love with the king?”

Pure Vanilla smiles ear to ear.

Shadow Milk rolls his eyes. “Not at *first*,” he mutters. “In fact, he happened to not like the king very much at all. He thought he was annoying, delusional. Stubborn.”

“Birds of a feather,” Pure Vanilla murmurs under his breath.

“Hey!” Shadow Milk snaps. “Quiet from the audience, thank you very much.”

Paborita Cookie tugs on his sleeve, drawing Shadow Milk’s attention back. “So how did they fall in love?”

Shadow Milk sighs. “That’s...” His gaze travels over Pure Vanilla’s gentle smile. “A longer story. One we don’t have time for tonight.” He lifts a leg, nudging Pure Vanilla below. “Because *someone* was late.”

“I have said my apologies,” Pure Vanilla Cookie muses, eyes crinkling with amusement. “Will you punish a poor, innocent child for my wrongdoings?”

“I’ll tell it tomorrow.” Shadow Milk stretches his arms above his head, stifling a yawn. “When you’re *not* here.”

Paborita Cookie pouts, but Pure Vanilla merely chuckles; he extends a hand up, gaze fond. “Shall we head to dinner, then? Before my poor Shadow Milk Cookie withers away before my eyes?”

Shadow Milk huffs a laugh; he takes Pure Vanilla’s hand, lets the other lower him down off the stage until his feet gently touch upon the ground. “Fine. You’re forgiven.”

“Wait!” Paborita Cookie calls; she’s looking between the pair of them forlornly, hands twisting in her dress. “Can’t you tell me how it ends? It’s not sad, is it?”

“Of course not,” Shadow Milk replies easily; his hand is still clasped tight in Pure Vanilla’s own, even as he turns to face her. “I don’t care for miserable, pointless endings.”

“So how does it end?” she asks eagerly. “Just a hint?”

“Hm.” Shadow Milk glances upward, looking Pure Vanilla Cookie up and down. A pause, before he smiles slyly. “Want to show her?”

Pure Vanilla chuckles back, before leaning down to press a gentle kiss to Shadow Milk’s lips. Shadow Milk grins into it, kissing back as he stands on tiptoe-

“EWWWWWWW!!”

Shadow Milk scowls as he pulls back, breaking the kiss – Paborita Cookie has flushed completely pink while all the children on stage are bending over, making retching motions and covering their eyes.

“Quiet, you little brats!” Shadow Milk snaps, brandishing a fist in the air. “Do you want to be actors or not? How do you expect to perform Ryemeeo and Jamliette if you can’t kiss someone?!”

“Gross!” Biscocho Cookie wails. “Gross, gross, gross!”

“Philistines,” Shadow Milk mutters; Pure Vanilla merely snickers, giving Shadow Milk’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“So,” Pure Vanilla murmurs. “Shall we wander?”

“Yes.” Shadow Milk rolls his eyes, conjuring his cane to his free hand. “Come on, *your majesty*.”

Pure Vanilla nods, motioning with his staff towards the alley. “Do you want to head straight to the castle, or stop by your home first?”

“The castle,” Shadow Milk decides. “Candy Apple Cookie is having Jacaranda Cookie over tonight. I don’t want to intrude.”

“You don’t want to be asked to sit still and model again?”

“Also that.”

Pure Vanilla Cookie laughs; Shadow Milk simply huffs in reply as the two of them head out through the alley, the twin taps of their cane and staff in perfect rhythm with one another.

Shadow Milk’s home is a new addition to his life, but it’s an interesting sort of reprieve nonetheless. Only a few short weeks after Dark Enchantress Cookie’s departure, Pure Vanilla Cookie had come to Shadow Milk with a key in hand and a strange sort of resolution in his eyes, as if he’d finally made up his mind about something. They’d talked for a bit – about the pull of the bond, about Shadow Milk’s time within the palace. Pure Vanilla had seemed a bit nervous, as if worried Shadow Milk might take it the wrong way, but he’d made his opinion quite clear; Shadow Milk deserved to have his own space, a place where he alone could retreat to and decide where and how to be with full impunity. Shadow Milk Cookie had been a bit curious at first, expecting maybe a hotel room on loan at best, but he truly hadn’t expected the next words out of the other’s mouth.

Pure Vanilla Cookie had bought him a house.

Not really, not in a true technical sense, but that’s what Shadow Milk gleefully tells anyone who listens. Yes, it’s more of an apartment and yes, it’s more of the kingdom’s property that has gone unclaimed for quite some time – but it’s an extravagant gift and it’s Shadow Milk’s and that’s more than enough ammo to gloat with. Black Raisin Cookie had been amused, then

annoyed with his constant mentioning of it, and has now banned the topic from their time together entirely.

She brings him a house plant to help decorate, though. It's thoughtful, helps liven up the place and gives him something to care for. He's never done that before either – tended to a living thing that needs him. Perhaps Candy Apple Cookie had come close, but he'd foisted enough of that responsibility onto Black Sapphire Cookie that it hardly counted.

The pair of them also stay over frequently; they even have their own rooms that they've decorated to their liking. Black Sapphire Cookie had been key in helping him clean up the place, while Candy Apple Cookie had happily directed him around the markets to the best stalls for decorations. It had certainly felt odd spending Pure Vanilla's money on furniture instead of just summoning it from thin air, but the other had offered and Shadow Milk – Shadow Milk had simply never *done* such a thing before.

It hadn't been bad. A little too much walking for his tastes, but it had been interesting filling his homes with other's crafts, finding ways to make it all match together. His own spin on the décor still lined every room, but there's a very Vanillian flair to it all that's managed to creep its way in. Nothing too obtrusive, just little bits and bobs that accentuate his style rather than match it perfectly. A little kitschy, but they make the rooms homey in a pleasant sort of way.

As nice as it is to have his own place – and as much as Pure Vanilla had insisted on it – it's not as if Shadow Milk spends the bulk of his time in it. Most of his days are spent out on the town, either walking the streets or spending time at the Crow's Nest Inn. It's a bit strange to walk amongst them, feeling their eyes upon him with every tap of his cane; yet instead of suspicious looks, he's greeted with hearty hellos and often flanked by eager bar patrons trying to usher him in for another story.

Shadow Milk had expected some sort of change the first time he'd returned to the inn, the weight of being *known* heavy on his aching shoulders. Yet the moment he'd taken that first hesitant step through the threshold – nothing really had. He'd received the same chorus of greetings and a few slaps on the back that he'd winced through before being pulled on stage. The only real difference is half of them now call him by his true name, while the other half seemed wary of his own discomfort by letting go of Blackcurrant Cookie altogether. It's an amusing sort of mix, one Shadow Milk doesn't mind – largely because the way they smile and laugh with him is still one and the same.

The children who roam the markets seem to like hanging around the inn too; they frequent the courtyard whenever Shadow Milk's sprucing up the stage, treating it like a makeshift playground beneath his feet. When they get too rambunctious, Shadow Milk will simply relax by the fountain, sipping his drink and conjuring up props on request. The children all seem to adore him – the bulk of them, anyway. Biscocho Cookie still seems to have a favorite, has shot Shadow Milk Cookie the puppy dog eyes more than once while asking for the 'magical princess' to make a return.

Which is a... thorny request.

It's not as if Lady Milk Crown Cookie hates him. She's simply... unwilling, ducks each call with the same reasoning each time. She has no part to play at the moment, has no desire to

step in to entertain a child when her stage is so thoroughly compromised. Perhaps it's not Shadow Milk's fault, perhaps she's being a bit too prideful about it – but she is who she is, and that's precisely why she'd come into being in the first place. Lady Milk Crown Cookie demands perfection, and Shadow Milk Cookie is, well...

Imperfect. In her eyes, at least.

Even with a near-total victory under his belt, the problem of Shadow Milk's fractured body persists. Dark Enchantress Cookie may have fled back to her lair, but the marks she's left upon him have no easy erasure. His face remains splintered, his chest and shoulder remain torn and blackened. He still limps heavily, still relies on his cane every step of the way. He can float, though only briefly, and while his powers are far from diminished, it can be difficult to wield them with a body that rejects even minor strain.

Living with what Pure Vanilla Cookie has dubbed *chronic pain* is apparently commonplace for normal Cookies; Shadow Milk Cookie can't say he's a fan, but presumably neither are they.

It's not the worst way to live; truly, he has no complaints considering he's living at all. Taking things slower, one literal step at a time, allows him to drink in things he's never noticed before. A walk around the markets with frequent stops to rest and catch his breath may be annoying, but often comes with moments to simply observe the world around him in ways he'd never bothered before. Soaking in the scent of fresh bread wafting from the shops, gazing at birds fluttering about in courtship in the skies above – even closing his eyes and listening to the sound of wind chimes tinkling in the breeze are all things Shadow Milk Cookie, Beast or Fount, had simply never had time for.

The matter of his original body had only been brought up once, and in truth, it hadn't even been Shadow Milk who'd raised the question. He'd already had his answer; the sight of the chains encircling the Beast Cookies has been burned into his mind for eternity, each tied to another in unbreakable bond. White Lily Cookie had told Pure Vanilla exactly what Shadow Milk had already known – the spell was crafted to hold all five, and could not be segmented as they pleased. To release one Beast Cookie's body would be to release them all.

While Shadow Milk's reunion with his friends had gone better than he'd hoped, he's not deluding himself as to their goals. There is, perhaps, a chance of more discussions to come; his time with Mystic Flour Cookie had given him a glimpse of her old touch of care, and Eternal Sugar Cookie had always been fond of him. Burning Spice Cookie may be the toughest nut to crack, and Silent Salt Cookie is...

Complicated. That's the only word for it.

Still, even if Shadow Milk's relationship with the other Beast Cookies hangs precariously, there's been some progress with the other Ancients at least. While White Lily Cookie's opinion of him is fragile at best, she had promised to look into soul transference and alternative healing methods within the Faerie Kingdom. It's more than she owed him, is no doubt done for Pure Vanilla's sake, but he'd been grateful for it nonetheless. Their conversations are as short and strained as before, but it's not... entirely hopeless. She needs an apology, but it's never felt like the right moment, never felt like he's earned that right yet.

Dark Cacao Cookie's apology had gone remarkably better; the troops had arrived mere hours after Dark Enchantress Cookie had fled with an entire battalion in tow. Dark Cacao Cookie had been leading the charge, greatsword poised and ready – frankly, he'd seemed almost disappointed to find their foes had fled so quickly. A bit amusing, though his trip had once again come with an extended stay to re-assess the situation and bolster their defenses, something that Pure Vanilla Cookie had been all too happy to entertain. He'd also been eager to bring Dark Cacao Cookie up to speed on Shadow Milk's contributions, as well as –

Well. The conversation about the bond had been considerably awkward, as well as Shadow Milk's own hesitant explanations on the matter. Dark Cacao Cookie hadn't looked impressed with him, had given him just as critical a once-over as before – but, after many private talks with Pure Vanilla himself, the ire in his eyes had gradually faded. Shadow Milk had given them their space, and by the time Dark Cacao Cookie was ready to speak with him one-on-one, it had been with remarkable civility.

Shadow Milk may have overheard him bluntly comment to Caramel Arrow Cookie on Pure Vanilla Cookie's absurd taste in men but, well, there's not an *extreme* sense of disagreement there.

Still, it'd been nice to have Caramel Arrow Cookie back in the kingdom, though Shadow Milk's own appreciation pales in comparison to Black Raisin Cookie's. Dark Cacao Cookie had even instructed her to remain behind upon his departure, trusting her to keep an eye on things in his stead – and while the old Shadow Milk Cookie may have resented the obvious distrust, he at least likes Caramel Arrow Cookie well enough to enjoy her company. Not that he gets much of it without Black Raisin Cookie at her side but Shadow Milk's not really one to judge on that front.

Pure Vanilla Cookie is Shadow Milk's constant companion; even with nearly two moons having come and gone since that fateful battle, even with the two of them technically living apart, there's no delusions as to the complete inseparability of their existence. Their relationship is still kept in the shadows; partly out of practicality, partly for the giddy little thrill of it all on Shadow Milk's side. Yet, while it's deeply enjoyable to pull Pure Vanilla into secret little alcoves and kiss him stupid before his next meeting, there's also a sense of acceptance in Shadow Milk's presence within the castle walls that Pure Vanilla works tirelessly to cultivate.

While Shadow Milk hardly attends every political meeting, Pure Vanilla does request his attendance semi-frequently for some of the more difficult conversations. The meetings are never terribly long – if they drag, Pure Vanilla dismisses Shadow Milk before he becomes restless – but there's a certain charm to sitting down at a table full of Cookies and having them give Shadow Milk their full, undivided attention. They're still often nervous, certainly, but being able to so effortlessly dissect and unravel the puffery of a politician trying to throw his weight around is a fun little game in and of itself. Shadow Milk cuts through wheedling attempts at manipulation with blunt precision, a casual sharpness to his tongue that throws each pretender so thoroughly off-guard.

Shadow Milk Cookie may no longer be a Fount, but he still wields the other's knowledge to devastating effect. Plus, it's more enjoyable than he'd thought to sit at Pure Vanilla's side at

the table and radiate intimidation through his mere presence. Shadow Milk isn't cruel, doesn't terrorize or quake the room like before, but he is still a tangible, sharp threat to any who would think to try and manipulate the situation for their own benefit.

He still dislikes Clotted Cream Cookie, though.

Not every day spent with the other is tied up in meetings; while Pure Vanilla Cookie is just as busy as ever, there are times where they can steal away from the castle for some fun of their own. While Shadow Milk can no longer easily transport Pure Vanilla Cookie through the air, the other has become more comfortable slipping through the Other-Realm in short bursts. He's still tense about it, but insists upon trying again and again, with Shadow Milk there to pull them out the instant Pure Vanilla asks. They never go terribly far, but being able to walk along their favorite beach hand-in-hand is as pleasant a way to end the day as any.

Even on days where Pure Vanilla is tied up in meetings alone, even during evenings that drag on with Shadow Milk preoccupied in the tavern, every night ends the same way – wrapped up in each other's arms, pressing against each other like every night is their last. While Shadow Milk Cookie may have a bed in his own home, the fine layer of dust atop the sheets hasn't been disturbed in a very long time. He knows what he likes, treasures the plush sheets and vanilla scent that envelops him in the privacy of Pure Vanilla's own bedroom. At this point, he's even all but memorized the way the mattress squeaks beneath him when their kissing tips from gentle adoration into hungry fervor.

Yet, each passionate night spent together routinely brings up a problem Shadow Milk has been doing his best to ignore, a problem that thrums at his heart and sends shivers of nerves through him to even recall.

His Soul Jam is humming again – and it's only been getting stronger with each passing day.

It's not the bond; Shadow Milk's pretty sure of that, anyway. A few days after he'd first noticed the sensation, Shadow Milk had abruptly taken a trip through his portals to the farthest reaches of Earthbread he could manage. Shivering atop a snowy peak a thousand miles away had netted him nothing – no stabs of pain, no morose longing for anything but a warm fire and a hot cup of tea in his hands. He'd tested it a few more times, spending an entire day away in the plains of Scovillia just to be sure, but there'd been no repercussions to be had.

It's not the bond, and for that Shadow Milk is grateful. In his more panicked moments before certainty, he'd considered going to White Lily Cookie to be sure – yet considering their past, he considered it not wholly impossible that she'd just toss him back in the tree and be done with it if Shadow Milk had managed to mess this up again.

Shadow Milk could ask Pure Vanilla Cookie, but the subject is... difficult to broach. The first few weeks after the battle had been too busy, too strained to really sit down and chat as they should. Pure Vanilla Cookie had been weighed down by endless meetings with his allies, numerous preparations in case of Dark Enchantress Cookie's abrupt return, and a lingering melancholy that Shadow Milk knew stemmed from Cuccidati Cookie's betrayal. Even if he'd never cared for the little gnat, Pure Vanilla Cookie had, and losing a friend, even a bad one,

had left a lingering mark of sadness that even Shadow Milk's comforting touch cannot wholly dispel.

Yet it is with that same comforting touch that the pulse with Shadow Milk's Soul Jam grows, as if feeding off his contentment to thrum with power. The feeling is becoming nigh impossible to ignore; with each careless brush of their Soul Jams against each other mid-kiss, the warming sensation in Shadow Milk's chest is becoming close to scorching.

He has to talk about it with Pure Vanilla Cookie, has to know if the other's been feeling the same. It may not be the bond, may be something new entirely – but if there's anything Shadow Milk's learned by now, it's that putting off the inevitable is pointless at best and exacerbating at worst.

He still debates bringing it up at all, all the way through their walk back up to the castle.

There's little more to say once they arrive; they head straight to dinner for a lovely Roast Brie dish that Shadow Milk had purchased himself. When their stomachs are filled and the tedious paperwork finished, the last rays of the setting sun find the pair of them where they always end the day - up in Pure Vanilla's room. Pure Vanilla himself is seated before his dresser, eyes closed and hands in his lap, while Shadow Milk meticulously brushes through the other's long, flowing locks before bed.

Honestly. For convenience's sake, Pure Vanilla really should just cut it all off – but then again, he seems to enjoy the attention every time Shadow Milk picks up the brush to dote on him.

“Did you use that leave-in conditioner Fresa gave you?” Shadow Milk's caught on a small knot at the base of Pure Vanilla's scalp, doing his best to work through the tangle. “It doesn't feel like it.”

“I forgot,” Pure Vanilla replies sleepily. “Can you fix it?”

“Of course I can fix it.” Shadow Milk smooths his hand over Pure Vanilla's head; his magic flows, tiny tendrils weaving their way in to separate the knot. “I can do anything. But you should still use your conditioner.”

Pure Vanilla hums softly. “But then you wouldn't have as much to brush.”

Oh, cheeky. He must be tired.

“I have plenty to brush,” Shadow Milk retorts, giving Pure Vanilla a playful flick to the back of his neck. “Spoiled thing.”

“I'm sorry.” Pure Vanilla yawns, a hand coming up to cover his mouth. “I really did forget.”

“Well, try to remember.” Shadow Milk continues, resuming his brushing with a dramatic sigh. “Honestly. What if my shoulder started hurting from all this extra work you're giving me? Did you ever think about my shoulder, hm? I'm *wounded*, Pure Vanilla Cookie. You have to be nice to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Pure Vanilla repeats, and this time sounds as if he means it. He turns slightly, extending his arms in a beckoning motion. “Come here.”

Shadow Milk sets down the brush, sliding into Pure Vanilla’s embrace as he’s drawn effortlessly down into the other’s lap. “I’m only teasing,” he murmurs as Pure Vanilla nuzzles against him. “You know that.”

“I know,” Pure Vanilla hums, pressing a chaste kiss to the side of Shadow Milk’s head. “But I’m still sorry you’re hurting. I wish I could do more.”

“Yeah,” Shadow Milk snorts. “Because *you*, of all Cookies, haven’t done enough for me. Fool.”

Pure Vanilla merely squeezes him in reply, arms looping comfortably around Shadow Milk’s waist. “I can still wish for things. Just as I wish for you to know the depths of my affections.”

“Ugh.” Shadow Milk sighs, rolling his eyes for effect. “Always with the affirmation.”

“Mhm.” Another kiss to Shadow Milk’s cheek, one Shadow Milk returns by tilting his head so that Pure Vanilla has access to his neck. There’s a smile, a series of doting little pecks trailed up the curve of Shadow Milk’s throat before Pure Vanilla murmurs: “Ready for bed?”

A loaded question, especially when accompanied by the feeling of Pure Vanilla’s hand smoothing against Shadow Milk’s hip.

“In a minute,” Shadow Milk replies, with restraint even he’s surprised by. “I wanted to ask you something.”

Pure Vanilla’s gentle touches still as he pulls his head back, giving Shadow Milk a curious once-over. “Yes?”

“How have you...” Shadow Milk licks his lips. “How have you been feeling? Recently, I mean.”

There’s a blink, a brow furrowed in deeper confusion. “I’ve been doing well, as far as I can recall. Are you asking if I’m ill?”

“No.” Shadow Milk shakes his head. “I just mean...” His hand comes up, unconsciously brushing against his brooch. “How have you been feeling about your... Soul Jam? Has it felt strange?”

Pure Vanilla perks a brow. “Has yours?”

“Yes.” A nod, with only slight hesitation. “That’s why I’m asking.”

“Hm...” Pure Vanilla trails off thoughtfully. “I suppose it’s been feeling a bit... stronger, I suppose. It feels as though it did when I was a younger Cookie, full of energy.” A smile, soft and sweet. “Full of happiness.”

Oh.

“I see.” Shadow Milk’s own eyes avert, relief and slight confusion intermingling. “Alright.”

“What about your own?” Pure Vanilla’s grasp shifts slightly, adjusting Shadow Milk in his lap. “You seem worried.” A gentle squeeze. “Are you concerned about another bond?”

A bit annoying to be read like an open book, but Shadow Milk supposes it’s the most natural conclusion to be found. “A bit. I’ve already tested it by staying far away, so I don’t think it’s... like it was, at least. If there is a bond at all.”

“Have you been in any pain?” Pure Vanilla’s gaze roams over him searchingly. “Any feelings of what it was like before?”

“No. Not beyond the usual pain.” Shadow Milk shrugs his uninjured shoulder. “My Soul Jam just feels warm. Whenever we...” Shadow Milk waves a hand for the word. “*Clink* them together, even briefly, it feels... different.”

“Any pulling sensation? Like you’re being dragged under as before?”

It’d be amusing just how practiced Pure Vanilla’s clinical appraisals are if it were any other matter. “No,” Shadow Milk affirms with another shake of his head. “Just warm.”

“Well,” Pure Vanilla remarks, “then maybe we need to test it.”

Shadow Milk’s brow furrows. “Test how?”

“Press the Soul Jams together.” Pure Vanilla offers him a small smile. “If you’re willing.”

There’s a blink, a flicker of unease as Shadow Milk glances down. Their brooches gleam in the soft glow of the lamplight, winking back even as Shadow Milk levies them with a distrustful stare. “Are *you* willing?” Shadow Milk says after a moment. “You were the one who got the worst of it. What if this just replicates the bond?”

“I don’t think it will,” Pure Vanilla replies easily. “We’ve had no pain, no sensation of being tugged towards each other. If you’ve been far away, as you said, then distance is not a factor.” A hand comes up, gently brushing the hair from Shadow Milk’s eyes. “If this new development troubles you, let us set your mind at ease. I want you to remain at my side in contentment, not fear.”

“What if it is a new bond?” Shadow Milk says cautiously. “What then? What if I can’t stay beside you without our chains returning?”

“Then we shall break them,” Pure Vanilla Cookie says simply. “Over and over, as many times as it takes.”

“White Lily Cookie will kill me first.”

Pure Vanilla huffs a laugh. “She won’t.”

She might.

“But,” Pure Vanilla continues gently. “I do not believe we need go to such lengths. I feel no trace of your magics upon me. So, yes – I am willing to test it, if you are.”

Shadow Milk averts his gaze, thinking to himself. There’s a prolonged period of silence as he mulls over the options; none of them are ideal, but there is merit in the idea of testing. If Shadow Milk is unconsciously forming another bond, they need to find out sooner rather than later. Shadow Milk wants to, needs to stay; remaining at Pure Vanilla’s side needs to be something he can be secure with. If he’s once again tying Pure Vanilla back to him, that needs to be nipped in the bud now.

Pure Vanilla patiently waits as Shadow Milk ruminates in silence, simply holding him close and smoothing a gentle hand down his back. Finally, Shadow Milk decides:

“Fine. But you’re the one telling White Lily Cookie if this goes wrong.”

Pure Vanilla chuckles, giving Shadow Milk’s hips another squeeze. “Yes, love.”

Shadow Milk shifts, leaning closer as Pure Vanilla sits up in the chair. Their Soul Jams hover inches away like this; Shadow Milk sucks in a breath as Pure Vanilla lets out a slow exhale, his shoulders drooping as he smiles.

“Ready?”

Not really, but Shadow Milk rarely backs down from a challenge. There’s a moment of hesitation, a final inhale to steady himself before Shadow Milk finally leans forward to press their brooches together.

Clink.

Nothing.

Rather, not nothing – the Soul Jam still hums happily, pulsing with warmth - but there’s no tugging sensation at Shadow Milk’s core. Even as they remain there, Soul Jams practically nuzzling against each other, there’s no sudden drop, no feeling of reality melting away. It’s a pleasant sensation, absolutely, a spreading warmth curling through his dough – but Shadow Milk is not being dragged under without say like all those times before.

It just feels nice. Like he’s being cradled by the softest pillows, like a gentle hand is running through his hair and scratching his chin in all the right spots. Shadow Milk’s reality stays exactly where it is, yet he also feels like, if he so chose, he could slip away into peaceful slumber if he simply let go.

Pure Vanilla pulls back; Shadow Milk does the same. They look at each other, blinking sleepy eyes before Pure Vanilla’s lips curve in a small smile.

“Well?”

“I feel good,” Shadow Milk replies slowly, trying to pick out the right words from his brain. “Cozy? Like...” He licks his lips again. “Like I do when you hold me.”

Pure Vanilla's eyes flutter, his smile deepening. "I feel the same," he murmurs. "As if I've been laying out in the sun, or napping before the fire."

Shadow Milk's own eyes close as he lowers his head, resting it against Pure Vanilla's shoulder. "What does it mean?"

There's a hum as Pure Vanilla shifts, pressing another kiss to Shadow Milk's cheek. "I think," he muses softly, "it means our Soul Jams are happy."

"Happy?" Shadow Milk blinks, brow furrowing. "Happy to touch?"

"Maybe." Pure Vanilla's chin comes to rest atop Shadow Milk's head. "Our Soul Jams were once the Soul Jam of Knowledge. They were pulled apart and separated for a very long time. To be denied the one that completes you is torturous." A gentle, teasing squeeze. "Perhaps they're simply glad to see one another."

"Hah." Shadow Milk huffs a laugh. "That's all?"

"Well..." Pure Vanilla hums. "It could be that they're encouraging us."

"To what?" Shadow Milk rolls his eyes beneath his lids. "I'm already yours."

Pure Vanilla's grip on him tightens, just slightly. Still, his voice is remarkably steady as he replies: "To connect again."

Shadow Milk's eyes snap open; he pulls back sharply, giving Pure Vanilla a disbelieving once-over. The other simply smiles, sheer contentment in his gaze.

"To connect?" Shadow Milk repeats. "What are you talking about?"

Pure Vanilla cocks his head. "Didn't you feel it?" A nod towards their brooches. "As if you could just... slip away?"

Shadow Milk had. The thought is terrifying, yet Pure Vanilla seems wholly unbothered.

"I'm not saying we have to." Pure Vanilla's hand comes up, smoothing over Shadow Milk's tightly furrowed brow. "But it does feel different. Before, we had no choice – a single touch and we'd be dragged under, like it or not. Yet, this time I felt..." A pause, Pure Vanilla searching for his own words. "As if there was a door. Something standing between you and myself that I could choose to open, to allow you in."

"You shouldn't." Shadow Milk's words come out harsher than he means. "We could fall again."

"We could," Pure Vanilla affirms. "But... I don't think we will."

Shadow Milk Cookie averts his gaze. "You don't know that."

"I know I love you," Pure Vanilla Cookie replies easily. "I know you love me. The choices we have made to love one another are our own. There is no bond, no strings that tie us

together. I have chosen you, and you have chosen me.” Pure Vanilla’s hand drops from Shadow Milk’s temple to cup his cheek. “I know you are afraid. But I do not think you could force me to love you even if you tried. My true love for you is greater than anything you could possibly imagine. And I know beyond any fraction of doubt that that love is what you truly desire.”

“Sap,” Shadow Milk mutters weakly, keeping his gaze on the floor.

“Yes.” Pure Vanilla’s hand smooths gently over Shadow Milk’s cheek. “As I said, we do not have to do anything you do not wish. I am perfectly content to continue as we are. I only wish to set your mind at ease against the possibilities I know you are dreading.” A pause. “We *could* simply ask White Lily Cookie.”

Ugh.

“We should,” Shadow Milk says after a moment. He toys with the hem of Pure Vanilla’s sleeve. “But...”

He’s not... wholly opposed to trying. It’s not as if he’d been pining for the days of Pure Vanilla’s blank, happy stare, but the sensations that had accompanied their connections had been – intoxicating. Shadow Milk has no complaints as to the current state of things, as Pure Vanilla is more than happy to set Shadow Milk’s soul alight in other ways, but...

Can they do this? Can they connect as they did, embrace one another without consuming them whole?

Can Shadow Milk stop himself?

He doesn’t know. He can’t know.

Not unless he tries.

“Fine,” Shadow Milk sighs. “Let’s do it.”

Pure Vanilla smiles. “You’re sure?”

“No.” Shadow Milk shifts on Pure Vanilla’s lap restlessly. “But I want to try anyway.”

“I do too.” Pure Vanilla leans closer; their Soul Jams are held a breath away yet again, thrumming with renewed interest. “Who knows? It could be better than before.”

Shadow Milk snorts. “It could be worse.”

“It could be bliss.”

“It could be ruin.”

“All possibilities,” Pure Vanilla murmurs. “Will you stay with me to find out?”

Shadow Milk can't help the smile that graces his own face. "Yes. I'll stay." A roll of his eyes. "You big sap."

Pure Vanilla leans up, pressing a firm kiss to Shadow Milk's lips. "Thank you, love."

"Yeah, yeah," Shadow Milk drawls, before slyly tacking on: "Pookie Bear."

A snort, loud and unapologetic; surprisingly, it comes from Pure Vanilla himself. "Goodness. Is that my new pet name?"

Shadow Milk shrugs his good shoulder with a lazy smile. "I'm workshopping it."

They kiss again, slow and sweet – and it's during this kiss that Shadow Milk's lidded eyes happen to chance upon a miscolored patch on the ceiling. He pulls back from the kiss with a wet pop; when Pure Vanilla leans in again, Shadow Milk stills him with a hand to his chest. "Hey," Shadow Milk remarks, nodding upwards. "What is that?"

Pure Vanilla cranes his head back. "What's what?"

"That patch on the ceiling." Shadow Milk squints. "It's different than the rest."

"Oh." Pure Vanilla blinks. "I just patched the crack up there a few days ago." Another glance backwards. "Why? Do the paints not match?"

They don't. The difference is noticeable, a clear reminder of the damage that had been; yet Shadow Milk finds himself oddly charmed by the sight. "*You* patched it?"

Pure Vanilla chuckles. "Well, I'd noticed you looking at it before, so I suppose you gave me the idea. And I did have some help."

"Hm." Shadow Milk turns his attention back, a sly smile on his face. "Who knew you were so good at mending things?"

"Well..." Pure Vanilla's gaze softens.

"Shut up." Shadow Milk nudges him gently, motioning to their Soul Jams. "We doing this or what?"

"Of course." One final kiss is pressed to Shadow Milk's forehead before Pure Vanilla draws back. "Love. But, we should probably move to the bed. I don't think my back could take falling asleep in this chair with you atop me."

"Aw." Shadow Milk flutters his lashes. "You've fallen asleep with me atop you before, Pookie Bear."

Pure Vanilla grimaces. "Can't I just keep being *old man*?"

Shadow Milk grins, all teeth as he slides off the other's lap. "No."

The pair make their way to the bed, stopping to kiss a few more times along the way. When Shadow Milk finally falls back, letting the mattress groan in protest beneath his weight. Pure Vanilla settles down beside him, leaning over as cascades of golden hair tickle gently at Shadow Milk's dough. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." Shadow Milk tilts his head up, willing away the nerves eating at his jam. "Come on. I won't break."

There's a sigh, soft and fond as Pure Vanilla leans in, his eyes slipping shut; Shadow Milk exhales quietly before doing the same. The Soul Jams brush, ever so slightly. There's another moment of hesitation, a final breath before the curtain call, before the brooches come to rest firmly together with an audible:

Clink.

The world does not rip away. Shadow Milk is not dragged under, kicking and screaming; he is not clasped tight or pulled every which way in rapid descent, dizzying in its ferocity.

Instead, a feeling of calm contentment washes over him as, behind closed lids, a gentle sort of light filters through his consciousness.

There is no urgency, no desperation in its call. It beckons to him, waiting patiently at the edges of his mind for an answer – but it does not demand. It merely asks, glimmering with a warmth he can feel soaking into his dough.

Shadow Milk does not answer at first. He waits, testing the waters that hold firm beneath his feet. The light twinkles, a teasing sort of wink that brings a smile to Shadow Milk's face. There's a sigh, a hopelessly affectionate roll of his eyes – before finally, Shadow Milk extends his hand and takes a step forward.

Reality shimmers away in a sea of glittering, golden mist.

When Shadow Milk's eyes open, the scene that awaits him is almost painful in its familiarity.

He is back in the field, the same grass beneath his paws, the same summer wind caressing at his fur. The world around him seems – clearer, somehow. Gone is the milky silhouette of the grass – it now stands sharper, more defined than ever before as it sways in the breeze. The trees all around him tower high above, but their foreboding presence has been replaced by something softer as gentle sunlight streams through their leaves. There's even birdsong in the air, blurs of movement hopping amongst the branches as they chatter to one another.

At Shadow Milk's right, a soft bleat carries on the wind.

His head whips around instantly; yet, the sight that greets him makes him pause in surprise. A sheep stands in the field, wool dark and glossy – yet it is not alone. All around him are dozens of sheep, snuffling and milling about with bright, shining eyes. A few of them lift their heads and bleat in greeting; several more approach and bump into him in open affection before trotting off. Shadow Milk can only blink, looking every which way as he surveys the herd surrounding him.

He doesn't see the lamb.

Shadow Milk paces through the clearing, circling them once as he scans the crowd – yet for every peaceful sheep that meanders past him, not a single one bears the shining golden hue of the lamb. *His* lamb.

Where had it gone?

A strange sense of dread curls in Shadow Milk's chest; he whines at the back of his throat, coming to a halt as he plants his paws in the grass. His head tips back – a low, melancholy howl reverberates through the air, causing the sheep to lift their ears and glance towards him. As the sound dies out, Shadow Milk's head lowers, his tail drooping in open forlornness.

A loud, rumbling bleat echoes in Shadow Milk's ears; they immediately prick up as his head sharply swivel towards the sound.

There, at the clearing's edge, stands a large, golden ram.

Its fleece shimmers in the sunlight, a radiant hue of color that glints off the curves of its mighty horns. Two mismatched eyes shine brightly as the beast steps forward; it bleats again – low and rumbling, a call that Shadow Milk finds himself moving towards without thought. The sheep at his back watch in silence as the ram's song carries through the clearing; for each step Shadow Milk takes, the ram matches it in kind, the grass crunching beneath their paws and hooves until they stand directly before one another.

The ram's eyes roam over him, gleaming in the sunlight; its gaze is fond and kind. Shadow Milk cautiously inches closer, head lowered as he scents the air around it.

Soft and warm, gentle and soothing – unmistakable. Unforgettable.

His lamb.

The ram's eyes twinkle with mirth; slowly, it lowers its head to brush against Shadow Milk's own. Shadow Milk pushes back immediately, rubbing his snout against the lamb as a pleased whine sings through his throat. He shoves his body against the other, winding around it in a circle as the ram nuzzles against him with a pleased sort of chuff. Shadow Milk's tail is wagging fiercely, a blur of movement he couldn't stop even if he wanted to.

The lamb, *his* lamb – or perhaps, it had never been a lamb at all. The strength in its gaze is immeasurable, steady as it watches him circle it and bark. There's another low rumble and a satisfied huff before it lowers its head once more and offers a gentle lick to his cheek.

Then, the ram nudges him; it tucks its hind legs, settling down into the grass before him. Its neck cranes outward, beckoning to him with a toss of its head – and Shadow Milk doesn't need to be told twice. He lays down right beside it, burying his snout in its fleece as the ram tucks his chin right atop his head.

The ram's heartbeat is slow and steady; its fleece is warm and soft, wrapping Shadow Milk up in a feeling of utter contentment. All around him, he can hear the soft bleatings of

sheep idling closer, the grass crunching beneath their hooves. When Shadow Milk turns his head to look, he can see the sheep crowding up, just to lay down beside them both as they snuggle up against one another.

Shadow Milk's own heart beats happily as the ram gives him another gentle lick to the top of his head.

The summer breeze is warm on his fur; the air is filled with the murmurs of his flock, of the ram's soothing rumbles against his side. Shadow Milk sighs, low and long as his head comes down to rest in the grass; the ram drapes its long neck across him, heaving a contented sigh of its own. He can feel it breathe against him, a pulse that matches his own as they nuzzle together in the grass. Shadow Milk's eyes slowly slip shut-

And reopen to a pale cream ceiling.

He's lying on his back in Pure Vanilla's bed, just as before; Shadow Milk blinks thrice, refocusing on the world around him. There's no blurriness, no hazy fog over his eyes as he surveys his surroundings with an idle stare. Judging by the darkness, night has fallen, so some time has certainly passed – yet the moon outside the window has barely crested the horizon. It feels as if Shadow Milk's taken nothing more than a short nap, as opposed to dragging himself from the dull stupors of before.

Pure Vanilla's curled against him, half-draped atop Shadow Milk as his chest rises and falls with slow breaths. He's still fast asleep, but there's a slight flutter to his eyelids that draws Shadow Milk's fond gaze to them. He looks peaceful, content as can be just lying side by side.

He's also heavy.

Shadow Milk wriggles his arm out to give Pure Vanilla a poke; there's a sleepy grunt before Pure Vanilla's eyes slowly crack open. He too blinks a few times, his eyes roaming over Shadow Milk's openly fond expression before letting out a rather dainty yawn. "Mm..." he mumbles, lifting his chin up. "Shadow Milk?"

"Obviously." Shadow Milk gives him an amused once-over. "Expecting any other Cookies in your bed?"

Pure Vanilla offers a sleepy little smile. "Not currently."

Shadow Milk gently pinches his side. "How are you feeling?"

"M'fine." Pure Vanilla yawns again, arching his lower back in a mild stretch. "How about you?"

There's a moment of consideration as Shadow Milk toys with the question. He feels... normal. Refreshed, maybe, but not groggy and disoriented like he'd come to expect. Moreover, there's no pull, no feeling of longing eating away at him as he looks over Pure Vanilla in full. "Also fine." Shadow Milk tilts his head. "How do you feel about me?"

Pure Vanilla's eyes slowly blink once. "About you? Hm..." Pure Vanilla gives Shadow Milk an open once-over before his smile deepens. "I feel... like you should come to Custard Cookie III's bakeday party on Saturday."

"Oh good," Shadow Milk replies dryly. "Clearly there's no bond, because you don't love me anymore."

There's a laugh as Pure Vanilla lifts himself up; the pair of them scoot off one another, pulling the sheets up as they begin settling into bed. "Come now. It'll be fun. You just had a bad experience at Strawberry Crepe Cookie's."

"Rubbish," Shadow Milk sighs, fluffing up his pillow just how he likes. "They hired a clown. A *bad* clown. And you made me sit there and watch."

"That's true." Pure Vanilla Cookie tugs the covers up to his chin. "I don't think Strawberry Crepe Cookie enjoyed him much either. I had to keep taking the Wafflebot controller away from them."

"Should've let them. That would have been a real show."

Pure Vanilla hums, shifting onto his side so he can look at Shadow Milk properly. "Will you come? Black Raisin Cookie will be there."

Shadow Milk grins. "Yeah, her and her new *girlfriend*."

There's a small smile twitching on Pure Vanilla's lips. "I don't think they've given it a name quite yet."

"Eh." Shadow Milk shrugs his good shoulder. "Neither have we. Doesn't change much, does it?"

Pure Vanilla's eyes soften; his hand reaches out from the covers, finding its favorite place along the curve of Shadow Milk's cheek. "If-"

"Stop." Shadow Milk rolls his eyes for effect, even if his smile is gentled. "We've had this conversation a hundred times before."

"Twice."

"A hundred times," Shadow Milk corrects. "And for the *last* time, it doesn't bother me. We may have the Beasts off our backs for now, but there's no point in stirring the pot any further. We'll sort everything else out *after* the dust has settled."

Pure Vanilla's gaze is soft; there's a tinge of sadness in his eyes, but he still strokes his hand down Shadow Milk's cheek just the same. "Alright."

"Besides," Shadow Milk adds. "I already said I'd stay." A prideful, half-toss of his head. "That's more than any other Cookie's ever gotten, you know. You should feel special."

“I do.” Pure Vanilla’s voice is deeply fond. “Very much so. I’m very happy, Shadow Milk Cookie.”

“Aw,” Shadow Milk coos, “no problem, Pookie Bear.”

Pure Vanilla’s face scrunches unhappily. “Really?”

“See, now that I know you hate it, it makes me want to say it more.”

There’s a sigh as Pure Vanilla’s eyes slip shut. “You’ve been spending too much time with the children, I fear.”

“Maybe.” Shadow Milk snuggles deeper under the covers. “But it feels like good practice for the future, hm?”

Pure Vanilla’s eyes snap open instantly; he stares, searching Shadow Milk over with remarkable lucidity for a man that had looked half-asleep. His gaze is piercing, a sharpness that stands in sharp contrast with the amused look Shadow Milk’s giving him in return.

“What?” Shadow Milk drawls playfully. “You’ve had descendants before. And you *said* you liked children.” A sly smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “You never know.”

“Are you…” Pure Vanilla says slowly, “are you saying, you…?”

“Not right now. Obviously.” Shadow Milk replies easily. “But… I don’t think I’m opposed to discussing it. When the dust settles.”

Pure Vanilla sucks in a breath; Shadow Milk simply rolls his eyes and gives him a nudge under the covers.

“Enough,” Shadow Milk continues, voice far too thick with affection for his own liking. “Go to sleep.”

There’s some more shifting; Pure Vanilla’s arms are reaching for him, pulling Shadow Milk closer by the hip. The other feels warm, remarkably so – Shadow Milk can only huff a laugh as he’s brought upwards, for kiss after kiss to be pressed against his temple. Pure Vanilla’s wrapping him in a tight hug, nuzzling down against him with such fierceness that Shadow Milk can’t help but snicker into the other’s collar.

“Sap.”

“I love you,” Pure Vanilla murmurs into his hair.

Shadow Milk sighs happily, his own arms coming up to circle around Pure Vanilla’s chest. He squeezes, burying his face into the other’s neck as he whispers back:

“I love you too.”

They stay like this for a while; slowly, Pure Vanilla’s breath evens out as he gradually slips off into slumber. Shadow Milk remains in his arms, eyes lidded as the call of sleep tugs at

him – yet he refuses it, focusing on the sounds of the ticking clock and the gentle pulse of Pure Vanilla’s heart against his own. The other’s telltale snores are already beginning to rumble in his throat, but that’s not what’s keeping Shadow Milk awake.

The story of the Cookie who wasn’t a Cookie.

Perhaps it’s the dissatisfaction with leaving a story unfinished, but Shadow Milk keeps turning the words over in his mind. He’d recalled the tale with ease, as if it was nothing more than a children’s fable to entertain, to please eager young ears.

To warn of what-ifs.

Upon reflection, it’s difficult to say which Shadow Milk had been longer - the Fount or the Beast. There’d been so much time spent languishing in captivity, feeding into his perpetual rage as he’d stared down the bars of his prison that even now, Shadow Milk is unclear just how many moons have passed. As the Fount, he’d tracked the passing of time with the crumbling away of the Cookies around him, marking each new cycle with the death of a mortal he’d cherished, however slight his affections may have been. A bit morbid to think about in the present, but he’d never known any other way to be.

A thousand lifetimes, a thousand faces pretending to be a real Cookie all to lead, manipulate or destroy them – yet only now does Shadow Milk Cookie stand with a new sort of eternity before him.

He lacks obligations, duties to uphold or plans to be made. Shadow Milk Cookie does not have to attend meetings, or teach hungry young minds, or even plot the destruction of every living soul around him. Shadow Milk Cookie claims to have always done as he pleased – yet until now, that had been a half-truth at best. There’d always been a plan, a script to follow, something to help guide him to his next role upon the stage. He’d always gone through life knowing what he was supposed to be, whether it be by the Witches or Beast’s own demands.

Now, there is no script. No demands to be made of him. All that has been asked of him is to stay.

All that’s left to be is a Cookie – and that’s a role Shadow Milk is wholly unfamiliar with.

Pure Vanilla Cookie shifts in his sleep, drawing Shadow Milk out of his thoughts. The other sighs, low and long; there’s something mumbled, something that slips away into a half-snore as Pure Vanilla drifts off once more.

Shadow Milk bites back a laugh; the smile on his face is enough as he closes his eyes, nestling against the other with a sigh of his own.

Shadow Milk doesn’t know how to be a Cookie just yet, but he’s learning. Pure Vanilla Cookie will guide him every step of the way, as will the kingdom, a kingdom full of Cookies that have come to see Shadow Milk as their own. The Fount had no equal; the Beast, no solace. Here, as he is now, Shadow Milk has nothing to offer but himself – yet that is all they seem to wish for. Shadow Milk is as weak and fragile as he’s ever been, but has never felt less alone.

A strange sort of paradox, to be so highly valued at his lowest. Cookies really are rather strange creatures.

Sleep tugs at Shadow Milk once more; his eyes flutter as he feels Pure Vanilla's warmth soak into his dough, as his reluctance is slowly giving way to peaceful acceptance. As his tired gaze scans the room one last time, he spies a familiar blue plush resting atop the bookshelf, its buttons gleaming in the moonlight.

Such a small, pitiful thing, created for a singular purpose and summarily discarded – yet Pure Vanilla Cookie had taken it home, dusted it off, and treasured it just the same.

How amusing. Shadow Milk should have cottoned on to his fate from the start.

As Shadow Milk's eyes finally slip shut, he cannot help the small smile on his face. Perhaps he is not a Cookie just yet; perhaps there is still more to learn than he can fit in one lifetime. But so long as he is not alone, so long as he continues to move forward – Shadow Milk will continue to try.

Pure Vanilla Cookie hums against him; Shadow Milk presses a kiss to his chin, heart singing in his chest.

He'll keep trying. Over and over, again and again, a thousand times if he has to.

It's alright. He's in no rush.

He has forever to get it right.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone so much who's followed along to this point; the outpouring of love for Jambound has truly touched me, as well as all your kind words and messages. It's cathartic and a little sad to have this be my last chapter of the work ever, but I will continue to write and tie in any new works in an Ao3 Series so you will be able to find them linked from Jambound itself.

I'm so glad you've all enjoyed my work, and I strive to improve with each story, so here's to the future!

As always, you have free permission to book-bind this work and translate it to other languages with credit. I can also be found as @jambound on Twitter!

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